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Prologue

"There are some things people are not meant to see."

A line my now late grandmother used to say, and one that was quite true.

I had been interested in the occult since I was a brat, and upon entering university, I learned the truth of those words, stepping many times into the abyss of the spirit world. Ghosts — beings that are impossible for anyone to clearly define, whether they truly exist or not — and the legends that revolve them are at the center of this story.

And this story can also be said to be the story of her and me.

Her eyes glimmered facing mystery, and her words, uttered with an expression of ecstasy, always warped the world I believed in. The anxiety they built within me made me feel like the Earth would split apart. Simply listening would instill a fear that made me not want to look back, a fear as if someone were peeking at me from the shadows through a half-open door.

It was probably because the words she spoke included truths about the other side, truths so scant, grotesque, and twisted that only the dead could make use of them.

Only now, after she is gone, do I finally understand that.

As my grandmother had said, it was definitely a world not meant to be seen. It was a story not meant to be known to the living.

However—

However, I'm going to tell that story now.

I'm going to talk about it all from here.

Because if I don't — she won't be able to rest in peace.

Because she, having lived in the depths of darkness, and having struggled through darkness, won't be able to rest in peace.

Yes — I'll say it only once more.

From here onwards is a story that should not be known.

Case 01: The Wish-fulfilling House

Flow

1

Hey, mother.

If the beings called ghosts exist in this world, then—

Would it ever be possible for someone to prove their existence in a way no one anywhere could object to?

I think it would be impossible, no matter how much humanity evolves. On the flip side, it also means that no one anywhere could irrefutably prove that they do not exist.

From that standpoint, to discuss whether ghosts exist or not is a complete waste of time. That's why the only winners of such debates must be the ones who can enjoy ghosts purely as a source of entertainment. Indeed, I fall under that group, and I'm what's commonly known as an occult maniac.

Mother, you may not know this, but I’m a bit of a pariah in society — to be of my age and go ghost this, Unidentified Mysterious Animal that; I know that people laugh at someone like me. But you know, there are plenty of things in this world that are inexplicable.

Yes—

For example, the house I'm living in.

This bygone, almost thirty-year-old building rests on the banks of the Tamagawa waterworks, and the rent is exceptionally cheap, partly because of its remote location. I had just moved to Tokyo this spring, and was looking for cheap real estate, when I found this place.

The closest convenience store is a ten-minute bike ride away. It's surrounded by darkness and covered by a thick copse, and because there are no streetlights in the area, it's completely dark at night. Nevertheless, this old building was cool. It was built in the style of a mountain cottage, with a garage on the first floor and atriums on the second and third floors, so it was more than luxurious for only one person. The kitchen is as cramped as an office kitchenette, but it has a living room, a Japanese-style room, a bath, and even an atelier. From what I hear, an architect designed it as their personal workplace. For me, it was love at first sight. Furthermore, it was rare to find a place with a bath for just 30,000 yen in Musashino, Tokyo, and above all, it had a history that couldn't be ignored.

"This is 'The Wish-fulfilling House'," so said the smiling real estate agent who introduced this place to me. *"The architect who built this place became famous, the illustrator who moved in next became overwhelmed with work opportunities and moved to the city center, and the young couple that lived here until last month just vacated because they had a baby. You are quite lucky."*

After hearing that, who wouldn't sign up in a heartbeat?

So, I jumped at the opportunity. There was probably a feeling of superiority too, given that my university classmates pay over twice the rent to live in rabbit cages. In any case, for a while I thought what a lucky guy I was, and how my first experience of living alone had gotten off to a good start.

Yet — within a month, I realized how big of a mistake that was.

When I was sleeping at night, I heard these sounds ring out from somewhere. Creaking sounds of an old door desperately trying to be opened. At first, I thought there was something wrong with the building, but it was odd that it only happened around two o'clock in

the morning. I tried going out from the Japanese-style room in the corner of the second floor, which I had used as a bedroom, into the living room. Thereupon, the noise stopped. I thought, *"Maybe it's coming from up above,"* and went upstairs to check the atelier on the third floor. But there was nothing there that could be the source of the sounds. I'd planned to eventually organize it to look more stylish, but at the moment it was a bleak room, housing nothing more than my desk and a bookshelf. I looked around, but all the windows were shut, and there was nothing that could make a sound. After that, I moved to check the toilet and the bath. But I couldn't find anything that could be connected to the sounds there either. I thought it was just my imagination, and was about to go back to bed, when it happened. The sounds started up again. A creaking noise, like the sound of old wood grating. I could also hear the sound of something scratching. It wasn't a mouse or a cat or anything like that. It was an eerie kind of sound, like something trying to crawl out of some dark place after having been tormented for many years.

Gradually, the sounds seemed to stop echoing throughout the house and started to feel like they were seeping out of a space right next to my ears. From that day onwards, I kept all the lights in the house turned on, and shoved in earplugs whenever I slept, but the problem was no longer just about the sound.

It was about two weeks ago.

I found something definitive.

I found a "7" ("七") carved with something sharp on the wall of the staircase landing.

I immediately checked to make sure the doors and windows around the house were locked. But there was no sign that anyone had entered, and I was extremely terrified back then. It was a pretty big engraving, but I forced myself to think that I just hadn't noticed it before. However, a few days later, I found a "6" ("六") near the bathtub. It had indeed been carved by something sharp onto the wooden frame of the window. And then— it happened a week ago. I found the number "5" ("五") near the toilet, and even the most optimistic part of me was convinced.

Something was in this house.

And that this… was some sort of countdown.

I immediately flew out of the house; I couldn't live in a place like this any longer. I hadn't made any close friends at university yet, so I lived in karaoke spots and net cafes for several days straight. I couldn't talk about something like this to anyone. I didn't know any priests, nor any mediums. It was then that I realized. Right, the people from "Ikaigabuchi[1]" would be perfect for discussing this with. Like-minded people who, like me, were fascinated by the deep world of the occult; They might believe me.

And having said all that—

They definitely weren't suspicious people at all.

"No, 'we' are plenty suspicious."

"...Huh?" I recoiled at the sudden voice from above.

I turned back to see "Karasu-san's" white face, waving her hand at me.

"Sup, Nagi-kun."

"K-Karasu-san. How long have you been there?"

I checked the time on my cell phone.

It was ten-thirty at night. There were still thirty minutes remaining until the offline meeting began.

"Right around the time you started explaining 'The Wish-fulfilling House' to your mother."

"...That's basically from the beginning," I complained, as I hastily shoved my stationery back into my bag.

"Sorry, my bad. But you know, peeping is, like, our thing, right?" said Karasu-san as she displayed a cutesy smile.

This was a family restaurant near Itsukaichi-kaido Avenue.

We were going to have an emergency offline meeting here with the members of an occult site I frequent. And of course, Karasu-san wasn't her real name. It was a handle that she used online. Just as I, Nagito Yamada, go by the name "Nagi" online, she went by "Karasu," meaning "Raven." This was the third time we'd met, but I still didn't know her real name. However, she was a regular visitor on the Ikaigabuchi site, and thus a veteran of the occult in comparison to me, who'd only begun browsing the site in spring this year.

Her appearance was the same as always. She was dressed in a purplish velvet dress that reached down to her ankles, and under that was just a black camisole, which exposed her cleavage. Her breasts looked they would jump out at any time, which made looking at her awkward — however, this was her uniform of sorts.

"You're quite early, did you close up shop sooner than expected?" I asked, and in response:

"Pretty much. Fortune-tellers don't have much to do when there are no customers," she said as she took off the shawl she was wearing and sat down across from me. "But you know, to put it frankly," she looked at me as she played with the shiny skull accessory on her chest, twirling it with her fingertips. "Your house probably has nothing to it."

"What?"

"What was it called— umm, right, right, a schema."

"Schema?"

"It's a term from cognitive science, apparently. If you keep believing you're scared of something, then you start seeing faces in the stains on the ceiling, that sort of thing. The truth is that if you hear your house rattling every day, the scratches that were originally in the house to begin with start to look like numbers."

"...S-seriously?"

"Seriously seriously. I mean, you came to Tokyo by yourself from the super rural-ness in Shizuoka, and this is the first time you're living

alone, right? Furthermore, you're living alone in an old wooden house, so it's understandable. I used to live in a house that groaned and squeaked a lot, so I know how you feel. It's like the sound of plastic wrap, pretty creepy." She said that as she raised her hand to call the waitress and ordered a beer.

Wait, hold on a second. If this was just me being a wuss, then what was I supposed to say to the occult veterans that were coming to the offline meeting? Would I get banned from that wonderful site overnight for being such an airhead?

"Ahh, don't worry about it," she laughed flippantly. "They're the kind of people who love to get together and talk about creepy stories to begin with."

"But is it going to be that simple? Around ten or so people said they were gonna join today."

Thereupon, Karasu-san said "Huh?" and stared at me. "You haven't checked?"

"Checked what?"

"Today's participants, I think there are already more than 30."

...What?

I hastily accessed the Ikaigabuchi offline meeting board through my cell phone.

Thereupon, I opened the "The Wish-fulfilling House / Investigation Thread," and was astonished.

"It really is true. Why'd the number suddenly skyrocket? Are people really ‘’that’’ interested in 'The Wish-fulfilling House?'"

"Unfortunately, that's not it at all. You see, even the super regulars 'Suu-san' and 'Zippo-san' are also on the list of participants, aren't they? They wouldn't come for some mere ghost story."

...Some mere ghost story, you say.

She laughed at the expression I was making, plucked the phone from my hand and began to twiddle with it. Eventually, she turned the LCD screen towards me. "This person. The fourth poster, going by the name 'Yoishi.' I think this many people are showing up because this person announced their participation."

"Who is this 'Yoishi' person?"

"Who knows," Karasu-san grinned as she pulled out a cigarette. She lit the cigarette using a worn, thin-sized lighter, and after blowing out a puff of smoke, quietly whispered, "Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later."

"What?"

"There's more. 'Yoishi isn't a living person,' 'Offline meetings Yoishi attends end in disaster,' and what else was there..."

"W-what are you talking about?"

"Something like an urban legend that started being whispered around Ikaigabuchi. Even so, no one's actually met Yoishi. No one knows if Yoishi is some old man, or what their gender is. However, everyone who attends a meeting Yoishi goes to clams up. The entire thread disappears. The participants stop coming to Ikaigabuchi, or—"

"Or?"

"They die."

Her low whisper felt like I was being doused with cold water from my neck down my spine. On the other hand, Karasu-san was happily receiving her shiny cup of beer, exclaiming "Woah, delicious!" in a lackadaisical tone.

"But those...those are just rumors, right?" I asked, and she replied "That's right", while laughing.

"So, basically, even if 'The Wish-fulfilling House' is a miss, there's hope that 'Yoishi' pops up, everyone gathering today is looking forward to that. So you have no reason to fret," she said, but even so, I had some pretty mixed feelings.

Until now, and until today, I trembled with fear alone, unable to go back home. That's why I went to the trouble of organizing today's offline meeting, in the hopes of hearing the opinions from the veterans of Ikaigabuchi. Having the story blown off immediately as my misunderstanding wasn't enough to make me go, 'Ah, so that's what it was', and quell my fears.

"But — if Yoishi has gotten interested, might 'The Wish-fulfilling House' be the real deal?"

"Who knows...I'm just interested in seeing how Yoishi-kun's appearance turns a horror story that doesn't interest me into something eerier."

...Doesn't interest her...

"If it's still bothering you, Ikaigabuchi has a page for investigating haunted areas. You can request an investigation on there. Although I still think you'll just end up being laughed at," she laughed as she finished gulping down her beer in the blink of any eye.

Indeed, the occult website I often frequent, Ikaigabuchi, did conduct on-the-spot investigations of haunted places across the country, both famous and unknown.

After an investigation, the haunted spots were rated on a four-point scale from A to D, with A being the most dangerous. This rating was quite unique, in that even famed areas such as Taira no Masakado's Grave[2] and Oiwainaritamiya Shrine[3] were jointly given a D-rank by Ikaigabuchi — In other words, they were rated as having the lowest level of danger. Supposedly, it was because those areas had become a place where ghosts and humans were "segregated" on the basis of mutual respect.

On the other hand, places given an A-rank were often unknown to the general public. Places such as crime scenes that involved murders brought forth by ugly emotions such as infatuation and jealousy, or at the site of an elderly person's lonely death, who spread their fanatical delusions until the moment of their death. They say that those places serve as lightning rods for souls that resent this world, souls that have lost their personalities and simply became a mass of resentment, who

exert an inescapable malice towards those that approach them.

As I thought such things, Karasu-san had begun peering intently at my face. "Hey, Nagi-kun."

"Yes?”

"You have the sign of a meeting."

"What?"

"And it's — with a girl."

...Seriously?

My expression relaxed at hearing those words.

"Could you please elaborate a little more?"

"Hmm..." She began playing with the realistic skull-shaped accessory near her chest as she continued. "How should I put it...it's a very intense encounter. Like two split souls are reuniting... But—" she declared with a look that seemed to see right through me to some other world. "It's hard to say if meeting this girl will actually result in happiness for you."

"What do you mean?"

"And furthermore... Huh? Wait, isn't she already dead?"

.....Hey!

Isn’t that like being possessed or something?

You've gotta be kidding me, I thought, but I also remembered that she would tell me such ominous things every time we met. Previously, she'd told me I would have luck with bicycles, and then I got hit from behind by a mama-cycle on the way back home. Another time she told me I would have golden luck and I was happy about it, then I stepped on a gold-colored thumbtack at home. In other words, she has a subtle skill as a fortune-teller, conveying people's unhappiness in a way that does not make them feel unhappy.

"You know, Karasu-san, if you're a fortune-teller, shouldn't you also teach people how to avoid misfortune?" I asked.

"Well, It's up to the individual to decide whether they consider misfortune to be misfortune." she said, and stuck out her tongue in a cutesy way, then shouted to the employee passing by, "Another beer, please!"

As I sat there, watching over her in a vexed manner, the chime at the entrance rang in rapid succession, and one after another, suspicious-looking people entered. Seeing as they were coming over after recognizing Karasu-san, I deduced they were people attending the offline meeting.

"Hello, hello, Karasu-san, you look as beautiful as ever."

"Maru-san, it's been a long time."

"It's exciting, isn't it?"

"The cruel tricks of our fortunes, that we should meet."

As such conversations unfolded, the seats at the far back of the family restaurant, where I was stationed, gradually became more and more crowded. I recognized a few faces among the increasing number of people, but the vast majority of them were strangers. I'd been actively participating in the offline meetings in Tokyo, but I have to say that the world of the occult is really deep when you see new faces en masse every time.

Just past eleven o’clock, the group of people with bizarre tastes gathered at the back of the family restaurant, finally exceeded thirty people. Well, I'd picked the family restaurant figuring there'd be only ten people, so this was a pretty big transgression. The looks from the waitresses passing awkward smiles at me hurt.

"Are there any more coming?" I quietly asked Karasu-san, who was engaging in small talk with the other attendees, and she responded with her cheeks slightly reddened, "It's way too late to ask that now."

"There are a bunch of people who show up without registering, so there'll probably be a few more."

"Won’t that be problematic?"

"This might scare away 'Yoishi' too," she commented cheerfully, but—

This might be a bit troublesome.

◯

"So, which one's Yoishi?"

As expected, not even an hour passed before the conversation blew past "The Wish-fulfilling House."

The countless occult veterans crammed into the family restaurant all looked around at each other, frantically searching for the accursed "Yoishi."

"Alright, I propose we do one round of introductions now!" The middle-aged man going by the handle "Professor" suggested as such, his face was already red.

Judging by the number of empty beer mugs lying on the table, he seems to be quite the drinker. The chorus of "Let's do it! Let's do it!" began in response, and soon each person stood up one by one and began to speak. At least half the participants were already quite drunk, so the atmosphere began to feel less like a gathering of occult enthusiasts and more like a full-on drinking party.

"Me first! I'm Professor! My field of occult specialty is in the ethnography of forgotten cultures!"

"Me second! I'm Usagi. I love folklore about Ryoumen-sukuna-sama! [4]"

"Me third! I'm Harley! I get excited by stuff related to OOPArts! Among other things, I'm currently researching the Voynich manuscript!"

What're they going first, second, and third for? And why are Usagi-san and Harley-san both jumping on the bandwagon?

The occult maniacs, who were more playful than necessary, began to

introduce themselves one by one. And they did so in a ridiculously boisterous way. I alone, seemed to receive the sharp, reproachful glares from customers all over the shop.

"Me seventh, I'm Karasu!"

When she energetically rose from her seat, she was greeted with a particularly loud round of applause, and when she started reciprocating the affection, I completely gave up on discussing the house. Come to think of it, every offline meeting ended up like this, it was uncharacteristic for an occult website like Ikaigabuchi.

"Go on, Nagi-kun. It's your turn next," urged by Karasu-san, I begrudgingly stood up. "Umm... Eighth. I'm Nagi. I'm a university student."

"What type of occult do you like?"

"Uhh, I love all kinds of mysterious stories...but right now I'm interested in things related to ghosts."

When I answered half-heartedly to the question that had been flung at me, people began shouting "Too stiff, too stiff!" "You haven't drunk enough!" and someone ordered a beer for me without even asking me. Man, I'm still 18. I'm underage, I can't drink.

"It's fine, it's fine. I'll drink it. Just act like you're drinking and they'll be satisfied," laughed Karasu-san as she smacked my butt with her palm after noting my expression.

Well, in any case, that's how the thirty or so people introduced themselves in one round—

And in conclusion:

There was no one here who went by the handle of Yoishi.

"What? So they didn't show up?" "I showed up just to meet Yoishi." "Is anyone faking their handle?" Such voices arose one after another, but in the special space of an offline meeting, where it was not unusual for people to meet each other for the first time, it was hard to figure out if anyone was lying.

"Well, since we've all gathered, can we discuss what 'The Wish-fulfilling House' is—" I began to speak, but "Suu-san" cut me off,

“Here’s what I think," As I recall, he was an old veteran of Ikaigabuchi who managed a liquor store and liked collecting things like the arms of tengu and the shells of kappa, "Yoishi might be a different handle of Krishna-san."

I was listening with a sigh, but I reacted to that famous name.

"I see. That would make a lot of sense." Replied someone.

"If we summarize the rumors involving Yoishi — umm, 'If you get involved with Yoishi you'll meet a terrible end,' 'Yoishi isn't a living person,' 'Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later.' Things like that? But we've never heard any concrete news of someone dying, and maybe certain threads disappeared from the forum because Krishna-san used an alt account to participate and register haunted places that needed to be investigated, That's what I think, anyway."

I see, nodded Karasu-san in agreement.

"Krishna hasn't been showing up as well lately, so that'd make sense."

"W-wait please," I interjected. "Krishna-san, as in the administrator of Ikaigabuchi, Krishna-san? Everyone's met them?"

"We have met them, or rather, they've always shown up to meetings before."

"But they're not here today?"

"You want to meet them?"

"Yes, of course."

In the first place, the reason I became interested in the Ikaigabuchi site was because the person named Krishna was so fascinating to me. Of course, part of it was that I was interested in the occult from the start, but Ikaigabuchi clearly held an attraction that was different from other occult sites.

That was apparent, for instance, when looking at the odd sentence prominently displayed on the home page, "Things that bother people also bother ghosts." Ikaigabuchi was originally established as a site to promote the separation of ghosts and people. Most people can't see ghosts. That's why, regardless of whether we mean well or not, we probably bother ghosts more than they do us, it was a perspective that was both fresh and unique. And as I read articles about renowned haunted spots on Ikaigabuchi, my conviction deepened. Each article was filled with care towards ghosts, and at the same time, never forgot to show respect towards both the living and the dead.

"I've always wondered: Why are people always afraid of ghosts? Perhaps some ghosts play tricks on people, while other ghosts say, 'Come on, stop it,' and step in to intervene, yet no one ever thinks of the latter possibility. Maybe a certain amount of order is maintained by good spirits, and that is why the vast majority of people live their lives without ever being threatened by ghosts."

That paragraph in particular, struck a chord with me.

Those words hit me hard, as I had just arrived in Tokyo and hadn't met anyone I could call a friend. I realized more than ever that people were connected to others through sincerity. It gave me the courage necessary to think that I could make it in Tokyo, where it's said that people's relationships with others is tenuous, where people try to avoid needless interaction with others as much as possible. I was encouraged by that. That was when I actually began participating on the site.

As I read the daily updates of bizarre articles, I became more and more fascinated by this Krishna person. Their deep, yet wide-ranging knowledge of the occult. Their logical and elegant writing style. The sincerity that could be felt in every written word. They were packed with things that my soul lacked and things that I truly needed right now. Before I'd realized, I had come to think of Krishna-san as my brother and father in Tokyo.

And if I could make a wish—

I wanted Krishna-san to personally investigate "The Wish-fulfilling

House" themselves.

"H-h-how old is Krishna-san? What kind of person are they?"

"Nagi-kun, you're stuttering." "Calm down." "Here, have a drink."

Undeterred by the interruptions of Suu-san and the others, I rephrased my question.

"Please, tell me. How could I meet them?"

However, my question was met with an awkward silence from the group of thirty people.

"I don't think they'll show up to an offline meeting again."

"Why?"

"Some things happened..."

"Some things?"

"Well, you'll see. I'm sure you'll get the chance to find out sooner or later. But for now, leave it be."

I only received vague responses like that.

The brief silence in the family restaurant was broken by Zippo-san, who I think worked as a programmer.

"Um... I disagree with that opinion."

"That opinion?" In response to Karasu-san's question, Zippo-san pushed up his thick glasses and answered nervously:

"Um… The theory that Yoishi and Krishna-san are the same person."

"What do you mean?"

"To tell you the truth, I know of an acquaintance who met Yoishi at an offline meeting."

"Really?" the entire gathering was suddenly excited.

"What were they like!?" "How old?" "Guy? Girl?" "Which offline meeting?" They all asked in unison, and Zippo-san quietly answered:

"The offline meeting was for the investigation of an abandoned hospital in the Tama prefecture, about half a year ago."

"So, what was Yoishi like?"

"Umm, well...I don't know."

"You don't know? How come?" Karasu-san asked, and Zippo-san gulped once before answering:

"Because the guy's hospitalized."

"Hospitalized?"

"Psychiatric Ward," Hearing that, the lively crowd once again fell to a deathly silence.

Everyone fell silent as if something heavy and grim overshadowed the excited crowd in their seats.

"Hospitalized in a psychiatric ward? Is that Yoishi's fault?" asked Suu-san, and Zippo-san slowly shook his head.

"I don't know. But even after regaining consciousness, the only word he ever mumbled was 'Yoishi.' That's why I came to this meeting today, to ask Yoishi what the hell happened that day in the offline meeting."

Everyone fell silent for a while once Zippo-san stopped speaking.

From then on, the family restaurant was once again filled with stories of Yoishi. "Come to think of it," was the type of statement preceding conversations as tales of Yoishi emerged one after the other, as if being unconsciously recalled by those present.

If I were to summarize those stories—

It seemed "Yoishi" was someone who appeared very rarely on the Ikaigabuchi forum. They rarely posted, but when they did, they

would post on threads on almost any topic, and give accurate commentaries on even the most maniacal of topics. Taking into account the variable times of their posts, Yoishi was thought to have been an occult maniac that sat in front of a computer almost twenty-four hours a day. They had knowledge of the supernatural that rivaled that of Krishna-san, but their posts showed no signs of sharing the love for ghosts that defined Krishna-san. If anything, they could be described as creepy — a creepiness that felt as if a dead person had blended into the internet.

"Maybe there's some truth to the rumor that Yoishi isn't a living person after all," mumbled Jersey-san, who said he was a writer for a magazine. "Remember that thread that popped up on the net a while ago, 'I'm a ghost, do you have any questions?'"

"Ahh, you mean the one that was talked about as being the real thing? Even after running an IP search, the PC and host were unknown."

"In my opinion, ethereal forms have good affinity with computers and other digital equipment. Because, you see, brain function is also driven by weak electrical signals."

"You do hear a lot of stories like that about ghosts posting on the internet."

"Then, that Yoishi—" mumbled Suu-san in summary. "We can't see them, but — maybe they are already here?"

Those words sent a shiver down my spine.

I quietly looked around the brightly-lit restaurant.

It wasn't just me, it seemed like everyone had felt something cold.

After that, the gathering became somewhat reserved on the topic of ghosts. Gradually, seats became arranged by topic as people broke off into their areas of interest.

As the organizer of today’s offline meeting, I wanted to bring it back to the original topic, but I was certain no one remembered anything anymore about my house. In addition, the creepy stories that Suu-san

sitting next to me was telling were just too interesting. A story about a box found in an antique store that could not be opened, a talisman found behind a painting on a hotel wall, a woman‘s cackling laughter while speaking to a doll — each provided enough entertainment to leave you sleepless when alone at night.

Everyone lost track of time as they enjoyed the endless flow of occult discussions—

And at around one o'clock in the morning, the offline meeting dispersed.

2

"Please wait a minute!" As the Ikaigabuchi members scattered into the night streets in small groups, I chased Karasu-san as she flagged down a taxi on the main street. "What about my house? You know, 'The Wish-fulfilling House'?"

Thereupon, the rather useless fortune-teller flapped her hand back and forth with a flushed expression. "It's fine, it's fine. It's that, uh, umm, schema. And what else... I think I was going to tell you something, but — ahaha, I forgot~."

"What do you mean 'forgot'...?"

"Don't worry! You have the sign of a meeting! Well, see ya!" She slapped me on the back and then happily jumped into the stopped taxi.

As I watched the taxi drive off, I stood there dumbfounded for who knows how long.

"...Ugh."

Was it alright if I went back now?

To that house — to "The Wish-fulfilling House."

I began walking down the main street toward the train station, dragging along the mama-cycle I'd bought cheaply online for commuting to school.

Tokyo was filled with people even this late at night. In particular, the area around the train station near my house was close to many universities, so there seemed to be no difference in the number of people milling about from day to night. Around the time the station building came into view, I almost crashed into a couple of girls, then

subsequently apologized for it. One of them shot me a ‘What the hell’s wrong with *you*?’ look, but the other cracked a smile and said, "No, we’re sorry." I apologized again once more. That’s all there was to it, but it filled my heart with hope. Indeed — a fateful meeting was lying in wait for me. And with a girl, no less. This might be it. The bizarre events tormenting me at that house must surely be a catalyst for the happy times to come. In the future, I will look back at this string of events and laugh it off as nothing more than just another funny story.

I felt less burdened when I thought of it like that.

Besides, now I didn't have to move. Moving costs would be painful for me, given that I was receiving no allowance from home.

"The offline meeting was fun in its own way, so it's all good, right?" I muttered to myself, and finally straddled the bike.

I turned around and decided to go back home for the first time in a few days.

“None of the people that came to the offline meeting today said anything about "The Wish-fulfilling House." If you look at it from a different angle, that means it can't possibly be a ghost incident. It's a bit shameful as the original poster, but all's well that ends well, right?”

What would have happened if I'd dragged people over to my house, and it turned out that there were no ghosts or anything at all? I'd be a laughingstock.

Having finished completely arming myself with logic, I felt the pleasant night breeze on my cheeks and pedaled harder. I'd recovered to the point where I even started humming.

However—

I noticed something when I was about to re-enter the main street from the shopping arcade in front of the train station.

For a while now, there's been a strange, uncomfortable feeling on the sole of my left foot. It was like gum was stuck to my shoe, so I

stopped my bike and took off my sneaker.

Then, with my left foot raised in the air, I looked at the rubber sole of the sneaker, and froze.

I felt my blood freeze over and the elation I felt, evaporate all at once.

On the bottom of my sneaker—

The number "4" ("四") was etched all over.

◯

"Damn it, schema my ass."

The countdown was continuing, wasn't it?

I pushed the mama-cycle along with an almost one-legged step, as everyone passing by threw me strange looks owing to my frenetic expression, but I paid them no heed.

I threw away the sneaker with the '4' etched all over it on the spot. There was no way I could keep wearing such sinisterness. The cold of the concrete and the hard, scattered pebbles pricked my foot through my sock, but I didn't care.

Why and when was '4' carved into the back of my sneaker?

What was going to happen when the countdown ended? And what did I need to do, to escape from this terror?

I had no idea, but I kept on running anyway.

People in fancy clothing stared and laughed, but I didn't care. I just wanted to be somewhere warm.

Where?

Where could that be—?

Eventually, I found a late-night discount shop just past the arcades, and jumped in. A ridiculously cheerful theme song was being played

inside. I hummed along to the simple, repetitive melody as I checked out the wide selection of products that were quite cheap. As I leaned against a cosmetics shelf and mumbled to myself, a group of girls dressed flamboyantly avoided me as they passed by. An employee called out to me and asked, "Are you unwell?" and I finally realized that my left foot, covered only with a sock, was throbbing with pain. I looked down and saw that the sock was torn and dripping with blood, perhaps I had stepped on a shard of glass along the way. I bought some bandages, a pair of socks, the cheapest sneakers they had, and went to tend to the wound in the bathroom. I washed the back of my foot, wrapped the bandage, and wore the new socks. The cheap sneaker had a shoddy design and wasn't very comfortable, but it was far better than being barefoot. It was an unnecessary expense for sure, but I felt comforted by it. I was afraid of staying alone in the bathroom for any longer, so I returned to the inside of the store. I wandered aimlessly around the shop as if window shopping and repeatedly took deep breaths.

— *What should I do now?*

That was all I could think about, and yet, I could not come up with an answer.

At some point, I was absentmindedly just standing there in front of the display window, when the employee from earlier approached me again and asked if anything was wrong, so I left the store. I had no choice but to begin heading toward the usual net café, but when I got there, it was already full. I peeked into the nearby karaoke box, but even it had a line spilling out onto the street. I tried a few other places, but it was the same situation everywhere. Come to think of it, it was Saturday night. There would be no vacant places until the first train.

However, I couldn't think of anywhere else to go.

As I wandered around the station dragging my bike around, the police shot me suspicious looks. I almost felt like it would be more comforting to be arrested, but some level of common sense still remained in me, so I turned back to the main street.

The headlights of cars on Itsukaichi-kaido Avenue illuminated me as

they passed by. Numerous cars that normally looked like exhaust-emitting devices to me, but today I felt consoled by them. It was reassuring to eye things that could be scientifically explained.

However—

I may have reached my limit.

This was the same as being completely homeless, wasn't it?

I had no one I was intimate with in Tokyo, where the lights never dim. I had no place to go. On top of that, I was running low on funds. Without knowing why, I looked up at the night sky, but even in a cloudless sky, there wasn't a star to be seen. Only a dark space spread out as if it were painted over.

Maybe I could call my sister in the morning and borrow some money. And then I'd go straight back to Shizuoka. Tokyo was too much for me, which was something humiliating to say, but all this was just too unexpected. I'd imagine most people would have trouble with such a case as well. Mother, I'm sorry. You supported me so much in my move to Tokyo.

Then at that very moment—

At the end of the night road, I spotted an intense light.

When I lifted my head, I realized I'd come straight back to the family restaurant.

"I see...this place is also open twenty-four hours."

That was enough to make me feel like I'd found a million allies, and my knees almost buckled.

The drink bar here alone was cheaper than the net café, and it was a Saturday night, so there were plenty of people inside. I should have just stayed here from the beginning.

"Hahaha," With a dry laugh like that, I probably looked pretty unapproachable to any passerby.

However, the moment I left my mama-cycle at the bicycle parking of the family restaurant, and was about to enter, I was startled.

There was someone there even more bizarre that would make anyone stay away.

Outside the restaurant's large, glass window...

And amidst the thicket of fern bushes planted to cover the restaurant —

Was a girl fully dressed in black.

Even though it was spring, she wore a black long-coat. Her long hair stretched down her back, her skirt and even her boots were all pure black. Yet her complexion alone was abnormally white. And because she was lurking in the darkness, it looked as if something with only a face was floating.

...Wh-what is she...doing?

She was just standing there in the middle of the thicket, pressing her forehead against the glass as she stared into the restaurant.

It was so creepy I took one step back, when--

She slowly turned to face me. Her cheeks were shockingly white, and every part of her face was like a dream. She was modeled so perfectly that it made me feel like she was too good to be true, like a life-sized Bisque Doll that had accidentally been left there — that was the impression I got.

A girl whose color was the night itself.

Unexpectedly, those words popped into my head.

Those were the colors of the girl's eyes. Maybe it was because of the lighting, but it strangely felt like a large proportion of her eyes were taken by her irises and pupils, and under those long eyelashes, they seemed to glow jet black. Below her straight-cut bangs, they shone a dark color as they gazed upon me.

"...By any chance, are you…"

Those words naturally came out of my mouth.

"—Yoishi?"

The girl merely nodded in silence.

◯

Yoishi isn't a living person.

Those that meet Yoishi die seven days later.

Offline meetings that Yoishi attends end in disaster.

What I'd heard earlier floated around in my head as I stared at the girl in front of me.

Seven glasses were laid out on the table in front of Yoishi, each with a different type of drink, including iced coffee, cola, orange juice and Japanese tea; She'd effectively created her own drink bar.

"Um... Aren't you supposed to take just one at a time?" I asked her in an exasperated tone, but she replied:

"As long as I drink everything, there should be no problem," she spoke without taking her eyes off the glasses, and took one sip after another.

She drank the orange juice, then the iced coffee, then the warm Japanese tea, and then the cola. She faithfully repeated the order a number of times, sometimes adding Rooibos tea, black tea and melon soda as an accent. I didn't know if there was any meaning to the order, but I found it odd because when she drank them, it looked like some kind of religious ritual passed down through the ages.

I looked again at the girl who went by Yoishi.

She looked to be of high school age. Looking at her sitting directly in front of me under a bright light, I could see that she held immense beauty. But the problem was her eyes. Those eyes, like glass beads,

seemed to be looking somewhere, and nowhere. The air she gave off felt as if we did not share the same world, creating a unique barrier around her. Rather than the nobility of a princess, she was closer to that of a witch's apprentice.

"Anyway…"

I asked the girl dressed in black as she busily rifled through the drinks.

"Why didn't you come to the offline meeting today?"

"I did."

"No, but, you didn't come when everyone else was here earlier."

"I was there. Right there, the whole time."

She pointed toward the other side of the window, where I'd first found her — in other words, the bushes outside the store.

…Out there? With her forehead pressed up against the glass?

"What does that mean? From eleven o'clock until now, you've been there the whole time?"

"Yes," she nodded. As I stared at her pale face, I began thinking.

This girl—

Is she what you'd call a denpa? [5]

Denpa, an internet slang term for a slightly troublesome person who spontaneously spews out random occult delusions into the world, but--

It was already past two o'clock in the morning. To cling to the glass for three hours straight since eleven o’clock, that must have creeped out the employees. I thought that as I quietly turned around, and saw that a different group of waitresses than before were staring at Yoishi and whispering something to each other. Their expressions were contorted in a slightly mean manner, like an air of contempt for

someone who was more foolish than they were. I stood up, having felt like I'd seen something detestable. I immediately walked toward them and declared "I'll take a drink as well," then headed straight for the counter to grab a drink. I didn't know why I felt so irritated. Maybe it was because I felt like I'd been laughed at myself, being a fellow occult-lover.

I filled my glass to the brim with ice, then pressed the button for coffee.

—Now then, what to do from here on out.

As I watched the hot coffee melt through the ice, I thought.

I can't go back home; The countdown still continued. Furthermore, I've ran into the heresy-class occult girl from Ikaigabuchi. And now, for some reason, the two of us were at a family restaurant late at night. In a way, it's comforting that I wasn't alone, but given that my companion was the occult girl with strange urban legends attached to her, it was a tricky situation.

"You like bad coffee?" asked Yoishi when I returned to my seat.

"What?"

"I asked if you liked bad coffee. The coffee here is unsavory."

I looked at her seven glasses again and noticed that the iced coffee had hardly been sipped.

"Information that you can gather beforehand should be processed before you act."

Yoishi's neat, logic-filled words annoyed me, so I replied with some nastiness.

"Then allow me to gather information: Why did you come to today's offline meeting?"

"Because I was interested."

"In 'The Wish-fulfilling House'? Why are you interested in that house?

The sounds are probably just structural rattles, and the engravings might just be my mistake, right?" I intentionally repeated exactly what Karasu-san had told me in a self-torturing way.

But Yoishi replied, “That’s true”, without any hint of retorting.

"Then, why—"

"When I read about that house on the forum — I felt a bit of an oddity from it."

Her low, whispering tone gave me goosebumps for some reason.

"The internet is overflowing with countless ghost stories, but most of them are fake. Real ones, however, have a scent that cannot be hidden."

And with those words, something hot bubbled forth from somewhere deep in the pit of my stomach.

Having a denpa believe you isn't really something to be pleased about, but I was, to be frank, simply glad to finally meet someone who would listen to the source of my fears. It was true, that place was the real deal. I was already in tears because of the numbers carved on the sole of my shoe a moment ago.

"Hey, what is it? Is it a ghost or something? Are you the type that can see them? What do you mean by the real thing having a scent that cannot be hidden?"

I couldn't stop myself from blurting out questions in succession, and Yoishi replied nonchalantly, while she stared at her glass of orange juice.

"To answer your first question, it may not be a ghost."

"Huh?"

"Secondly, it’s not that I can see everything. Lastly, A feeling. Real ghost stories have a subtle lack of cohesion."

Yoishi began to speak, a sudden change from her dazed attitude from

before.

"Strange phenomena occur; The people involved become afraid. When you investigate, you find out that someone committed suicide there — and I won't say that such stories with a convenient outcome are all fake. However, the really interesting ghost stories transcend that. There's a sense of discomfort, as if something important has been skipped over. The only thing that can fill in that gap is a theory of the other side."

"S-so basically, what's happening? What are those frightening sounds in my house? Why are the numbers being scrawled, and why are they counting down? When the numbers run out, what's going to happen to—"

Before I'd realized, I had almost stood up as I shouted:

"—What's going to happen to me!?"

The restaurant went deathly silent, and everyone was looking at me.

Embarrassed, I sat back down. However, I didn't even know what was going on anymore. I had no idea what do from here on out. I scratched my head, feeling sorry for myself, when Yoishi quietly muttered,

"So, you are the one who posted that story."

I looked up, and saw a mysterious glow in Yoishi's cold, dark eyes.

I nodded, and told her everything that had just happened.

That the countdown was already down to "4" ("四"), that it had been carved onto the bottom of the sneaker I had been wearing. I explained all of that as I trembled.

"How does someone even carve that? Is something from that house haunting me all the way here?" I complained, almost in tears — when I gasped.

Yoishi's eyes, which resembled glass beads, were now brimming with life.

Then, she suddenly raised her finger to the tip of my nose and said, "Hey, close your eyes."

"Huh?"

She turned her beautiful white face directly at me, and peered into my eyes. The shape of her facial features took over my field of vision, and to be honest, my heart raced.

"Why do I have to close my eyes?"

"Just do it."

Flustered, I did what she told me to do. As I closed my eyelids tightly, some kind of inappropriate fantasy ran through my head, but I did my best to brush it away.

"Imagine..."

Her lips moved on the other side of my eyes, and she spoke commandingly.

"You are now standing at the entrance of your house."

Her voice, somewhat gentle and commanding, made me stand in front of that house, whether I wanted to or not.

"Imagine yourself standing in front of the entrance to your house in as much detail as possible."

As if prompted by her words, I recalled the house that stood in the dark.

Black — its pointed, mountain cottage-like shape.

The reddish-brown roof, the mountain cottage style structure, and the atelier built by an architect exclusively for himself. The walls were stained nicely and covered with ivy halfway up to the second floor, and the white paint on the wooden window sills had begun to peel off. The first floor was a garage, and the second and third floors were living quarters. The house that I rented for 30,000 yen, which didn't even have a kitchen. The house where strange sounds would begin to

ring out from somewhere at night, and where a number would be engraved somewhere the following morning—

My legs began to tremble, but I clutched my knees tightly with my hands, and managed to hold on.

"Alright. Once you've called it to mind, place your hand on the doorknob."

"...Ok."

"Now please open the door."

I opened it. My shoes were lying scattered in the doorway. They were the leather shoes I'd kicked off when I rushed out in a hurry. But from there, my feet refused to take one step further. I felt someone inside the house, when it should have been empty. The thick, sticky air made me feel that way. No way, I didn't want to go any further, even if this was just my imagination.

Perhaps sensing my thoughts, Yoishi whispered, "You'll be fine. Please go inside slowly. Then take off your shoes as you always do and enter. Once inside, open all the windows in the house, it doesn't matter which order you do it in. Open them precisely, one by one, with complete certainty."

...Windows? Why open the windows?

I wondered, but obeyed anyway. I approached the living room window, unlocked it and opened it. From there, I moved to the Japanese-style room I was using as a bedroom and unlocked and opened the window there. Then from the Japanese-style room to the bathroom. Opened. Next, the bath. Opened. From there, I proceeded to the third floor. There were two windows there, one by the veranda and one next to my desk. I unlocked and threw the both of them open with precision.

"...I'm finished."

"Then, this time, please close the windows in reverse order."

"...Huh?"

"Close them in order, starting with the last one you opened."

Having no other choice, I did as she said.

The window on the third floor by the desk. Veranda window. Then down to the second floor, and uh, the bath, toilet, Japanese-style room, living room.

I closed them all.

"Alright, you're done. Now open your eyes."

Hearing Yoishi’s voice, I opened my eyes to the blinding fluorescent light. I wasn’t aware of the bright pop music filling the restaurant until now, but suddenly, I could hear it. Right, I was in a family restaurant. As I rubbed my eyes to get used to it, Yoishi asked me:

"How was it?"

"What do you mean how was it, what was the point of that?"

"Was there anyone in the rooms?"

At those words, my hair stood on ends.

...There was.

On the staircase landing linking the second and third floors. I think I saw a middle-aged man wearing ashen-colored clothing. He looked vacant and motionless, yet he stared at me with his eyes, as if he was watching everything I did. I couldn't catch him in the front of my vision, But out of the corner of my eye, I could definitely see his presence—

"...There was, wasn't there?" Yoishi's black eyes shone somewhat delightedly. "Was it someone you know?"

"...I don’t know. Never seen him before."

No... How could that be? How is it possible to recall someone in your imagination that you've never met before? With the house still markedly visible in my mind, Yoishi's joyful voice echoed.

"Scared?" I looked, and saw Yoishi had come close enough that I could feel her breath. "Hey, are you feeling scared right now?"

...I’m scared.

Or perhaps I should say, I'm scared of your eyes that look like they are going to devour every part of me.

"Tell me in more detail. What did they look like?"

Taking a deep breath, I explained while trying to stop myself from trembling.

A gray, worn suit. I don't think he was wearing a tie. The suit seemed a bit big, but that may have been because the man was thin. His hair had streaks of grey, and I couldn't make out his face. His long hair seemed to have grown out in a messy way. The shoes he wore were black.

In response, Yoishi went "Hmm..." as she stroked her well-shaped chin.

After a moment of silently gazing around in mid-air, she turned her gaze toward me once more.

"Hey, how about we go?"

"—Go where?"

"To your house. Right now."

3

—Ahh, why did things turn out like this?

It was a night with a beautiful moon; I was pedaling hard on the mama-cycle.

I passed through the residential area to the north of the train station near the family restaurant, and from there, I continued west along the drainage channel. The drainage channel was called Shimokawa and was one of the tributaries of the Tamagawa waterworks. This river gradually curved northeast, towards the area I lived. Every time my bike bounced off the bumpy road, Yoishi's body would press against my back. I could feel the bulge of her small breasts through my jersey, and I indulged in misplaced delusions of how we looked like a nice couple.

However, clinging to my back was a denpa girl dressed entirely in black. Her arms wrapped around my waist were oddly cold. Aren't girls supposed to have a higher body temperature? Shouldn’t they be like soft, warm, and smell nice? However, I couldn’t feel any body heat from Yoishi, who was sitting in the back seat of my bicycle. In fact, if it turned out that she was someone only I could see, I wouldn't even be surprised. That's how far away from a date this night-time bicycle rendezvous felt like.

The residential area became increasingly distant, and fields belonging to landowners began to spread out in their place. Street lights too, diminished in number. It felt like there were more stars in the sky, and the smell of grass became stronger. We were close to my home.

"Quite rural."

"Shut it," I replied to Yoishi after a considerable period of silence.

"I didn't mean that in a bad way. I didn't realize Musashino still had places like this."

"That's why I figured the rent was so low," I grumbled with a hint of self-derision.

Houses became even sparser, and after passing by a few old shrines, we entered the area lined up with dense groves of trees. A short distance along this narrow path would lead to my house.

"To be honest, I didn't want to come at night," I spoke towards my rear.

"It's a phenomenon that only happens at night, so we must go at night." Yoishi readily replied. It was actually a pretty good argument.

For a short while, we both remained silent, until eventually, Yoishi asked:

"What was your wish?"

"Huh?"

"After all, you took the trouble of living in 'The Wish-fulfilling House,' didn't you?"

'Took the trouble', she says, but the truth was I just had no money for anywhere else.

"Nothing special. I just wished that my family's business would go well, that's all." I answered.

"A family man, how surprising," Yoishi commented, devoid of emotion.

'Surprising' is pretty harsh, I started to reply, but then the house beyond the black forest came into view.

"Is that the one?"

"Yeah."

Looking at it again, I'm amazed that I had rented such a place. It looked like a haunted house no matter how you looked at it.

As soon as I slid the mama-cycle into the ground-floor garage, Yoishi jumped off the rear seat of the bike. I pressed the switch on the steel column and the garage's ceiling light turned on. That was all it took to significantly reduce my fear. Yoishi began walking about on her own, looking at the building from several angles.

"A magnificent building."

She said, as she began walking ahead of me. She went up the stairs to the entrance on the second floor. Not having any other choice, I placed one foot on the stairs, but could go no further. As for Yoishi, she quickly climbed the stairs, casually opened the door, and took a glance inside. Ahh, right. Now that I think about it, I rushed out without locking the door. That means I'd left it unlocked for several days, how careless of me.

All I could do was look from the bottom of the stairs. It was pretty pathetic of me, but I was the one that experienced the fear. I'd say it's animal instinct to not want to get any closer unless safety is ensured.

"How is it?"

"Dark."

Well of course it is.

And with that, Yoishi quickly went inside. I was afraid of being left behind at the bottom of the stairs, so I rushed after her. When I opened the front door, the lights were already on inside. Yoishi stood right next to the light switch, and glanced around from the ceilings to the walls. Lights really are a great thing. I was calmed just by it being bright, so much so that I didn't know whether those creepy happenings were real or not.

When I was about to take off my shoes at the foyer, I saw that Yoishi's knee-high boots had already been neatly taken off and arranged. She might have had a better upbringing than I thought, but then it struck me.

Come to think of it, we hadn't even properly introduced ourselves to each other yet.

"Hey, I know it's belated, but--" I turned toward her and said, "I go by 'Nagi' online, but my real name is Nagito Yamada. I'm in my first year of university this spring."

She simply nodded once without turning around and said:

"I'm Yoishi."

"Isn't that a handle?"

"No. My surname is Mitsurugi. Not that it matters."

—Yoishi Mitsurugi ("美鶴木 夜石").

She was a very strange one indeed. What kind of person reveals their real name on the internet and doesn't give a shit about their surname?

"'5' ("五") was on the wall of the toilet?"

She asked, as if suggesting that the conversation we just had was a waste of time, so I pointed to the far end of the second floor and said, “That way”. Yoishi silently moved in that direction. Without hesitation, she opened the door, turned on the lights, and peered in.

I quietly followed.

"See? It looks like the number '5' ("五"), doesn't it? It's not a schema or whatever, right?" I asked Yoishi from behind.

"You know of words such as schema?" she asked in a condescending manner.

"Well, I mean, I am an occult maniac, after all."

That was a lie. It was a piece of information I had only just acquired.

"If you look at a meaningless shape with prior knowledge of a specific set of information, the brain tends to recognize the figure in line with

that information— that is a schema in cognitive science, but this is without a doubt a '5' ("五"). Even I see it that way."

Yoishi spoke as she traced her fingertips over the engraving, paying no heed to my words.

Well, even if it wasn't a schema, it didn't solve the problem. If anything, it made things worse. If this was truly a deliberately-written "5" ("五"), then someone — or something — in this house wrote it.

"'6' ("六") was near the bath?"

After she finished carefully examining the "5" ("五"), Yoishi switched on the light in the room with the bath just opposite to the toilet and opened the door. She moved her face right in front of the symbol engraved into the window sill. As I watched the scene from behind her, I caught the smell of something odd.

Truth be told, it'd been bothering me since I met her — but now that I was in an enclosed space with her, it became clear to me once more.

"...Are you wearing some sort of perfume?"

Yoishi wordlessly shook her head.

"Wait, but this smell on you..."

That's when I realized what that smell was.

I'd smelled it in club rooms during middle school.

A somewhat sour, nose-curdling smell, as if something was rotting.

"...Um, I totally understand this is a rude thing to ask a girl," I asked, pinching my nose, "But when did you last take a bath?"

Yoishi turned around and looked at me quizzically. Then she looked up at the ceiling. I had a bad feeling about that gesture, as if she was searching through distant memories.

"Wha... It was so far back you have to think about it?"

"I don't quite remember, maybe last month?"

"Wh-what the hell! Get in the bath! The bath!"

"But I'm already here."

"That's not what I meant! Do you not take showers? Wash your hair?"

"What does that have to do with the numbers counting down?" Yoishi seemed completely bewildered as she asked me, but come on, I'd heard about the term "dirty girl," and I know French royalty were famous for never taking baths, but this is contemporary Japan. Do high school girls that don't take baths for a month exist?

"What you say lacks reason," she said flatly, and then peered closely at the window sill once more. "It is unmistakably, a '6' ("六")."

She quickly turned around and asked, "How about '7' ("七")?" She really had no interest in anything other than the paranormal. Sighing, I reluctantly guided her.

It was on a wall on the staircase landing to the third floor.

This was the place where the middle-aged man I didn't know was standing during the pseudo-word-association game Yoishi had me play earlier. As expected, I didn't feel like following her there, so I just gestured towards it. Yoishi wordlessly climbed the stairs and leaned against that wall as well.

"Hmm."

"That looks like '7' ("七") too, right?"

However, Yoishi didn't immediately answer. Instead, she took out a mini-flashlight from her pocket, shined it at the number '7' (七), and looked all around it.

"Is there something strange about it?"

"This is certainly a '7' ("七"), but— it's strange."

I was about to ask *What's strange?*, but at that moment-

Yoishi suddenly vomited. She didn't do anything cute like place a hand to her mouth in an effort to hold it back, but rather, standing upright in a daunting pose, she boldly hurled, which definitely made me take a step back. She was used to vomiting, that's what that posture gave off, and I ended up completely seeing it through to the end.

Dripping vomit.

Sparkling gastric fluid, and the remnants of the orange juice she was drinking earlier.

—What the hell is she?

She doesn't take baths, boldly vomits out in the open…

And to make things worse, she's an occult-loving denpa girl who wears coats during spring.

However, I finally noticed that the denpa girl did seem to be struggling a bit.

"Hey, are you alright?" I ran up to her and began rubbing her back. She gave a feeble nod and wiped her mouth.

There was vomit on the landing, but she resumed conversing as if nothing even happened.

"Ever since I saw your post, I thought it was strange. Why did the countdown begin from '7' ("七")?"

"Huh?"

"Countdowns should normally start from 9 ("九") or 10 ("十")."

"How should I know?"

I mean, ghosts were scary because you don't know what they're thinking. How would a human like me know why something like that began counting down from "7" ("七")?

"Wrong. The paranormal has no rules, but the other side has a will of

its own." said Yoishi as she climbed the stairs; I had no choice but to follow.

As if to say there must be an "8" ("八") and a "9" ("九") somewhere, Yoishi turned on the lights to the third floor and began sliding up to the walls. Her posture, as she crawled about on all fours, scampering along the walls, was both creepy and comical. Afterwards, Yoishi began mumbling something to herself and didn't respond to anything I said, so I gave up and went back down to the second floor. I poured water from the small sink next to the toilet into a bucket, and threw a rag in. Even after everything, this was still my house; I couldn't just leave the vomit on the stairs like that. As I took the bucket to the staircase landing, I was reminded of the blank face of the man Yoishi had shown me in the family restaurant a while ago, but I tried hard not to think about it and cleaned up the vomit.

Ughh, why does vomit smell so acidic? Somehow it always entices you to vomit, too. Moreover, it was irritating that the person who vomited didn't seem to care at all. As if it was obvious that it would be my job to clean up after her.

"Hey, do you not eat? There's only liquid in this."

I commented with a bit of a nasty tone. But Yoishi, who'd come back down from the third floor, simply mumbled that there was no "8" ("八") or "9" ("九") anywhere. The way she said it, as if she was deeply disappointed, kind of ticked me off.

"Didn't I already tell you there weren't any more?"

She ignored my comment and began looking at the walls on the second floor. Half-exasperated, I watched over her as I went down to the second floor with the rag and bucket. Then, I looked at the clock. "Say," I called out to her, "Are you alright being out this late?"

Of course, that was pretty belated, given that it was almost three o'clock in the morning.

If I were her parents, I'd be furious with her for being out this late.

"I hope you called home before coming out at this hour. I mean, I

know it's my fault this is happening, but parents always worry. Back home, I always thought my parents were a pain in the ass, but once you leave, you feel an appreciation for that stuff."

However, she wasn't listening to my passionate sermon.

Instead, I noticed she was completely immobile, staring at a single spot.

"What is it?" I asked, but Yoishi didn't move. She stood still, frozen like a mannequin. I moved behind Yoishi and looked where she was looking.

It was the spot where Yoishi had just vomited —the staircase landing where the middle-aged man I didn't know was standing in my imagination.

"Wa...Wait a second. Who're you having a staring match with?"

When I placed a hand on her shoulder, she twitched, as if breaking free from a spell.

And then she whispered, ever so softly, "I see."

When she turned around, she seemed to look happy. I could tell by the slight blush creeping into her pale face that she was excited.

"Hey, did you notice?"

"What?"

But Yoishi didn't respond, instead, she turned around and headed toward the entrance.

"H...Hey, wait up!"

"Let's leave."

She quickly put on her deep black boots, then walked straight out of the entrance. I hurriedly put on my sneakers and chased after her. Trying not to look inside, I shut off the lights, closed the door, and remembered to lock it this time. After that, I stuck close to Yoishi as

she staggered down the stairs.

We arrived at the mama-cycle left inside the garage, Yoishi looked up at the building once more, and said, "This building is very interesting."

"What're you talking about?"

"Under the stairs to the third floor. There exists a meaningless space."

At that moment, goosebumps broke out all over my neck and back at once.

I see—

The eeriness that I'd felt all along about this house, I finally understood it. Indeed, it had always felt like something was odd about this house. And that was the area under the stairs which I could never reach. The area under the stairs that I just couldn't get into, whether from the outside or the inside. I'd often heard stories about doors that couldn't be opened, and this was similar in that it was a space where we didn't know what was inside, but its existence could be felt somewhere.

"And, look at this."

Yoishi pointed at the mailbox by the staircase entrance on the ground floor.

My full name was written on a piece of paper the size of a business card, with three lines inscribed on it, crushing the name from above.

It was unmistakable.

The number "3" ("三").

The countdown continued.

Yoishi placed her face almost right onto the engravings and mumbled happily, "This place is the real deal," but I spoke in a hollow voice:

"I can't take this anymore."

Fall

4

My brand-new apartment was fantastic.

The floors were nice and clean. The wallpaper was new. The unit bath was sterilized.

It wasn't right comparing it to that house, where the remnants of the previous inhabitant drifted everywhere, but I definitely learned that it wasn't right to skimp on housing expenses. This was even further from the university, but at least there were houses nearby. I could walk to a convenience store, and there were plenty of streetlights. Anyway, this apartment, whose surroundings were brightly lit, even at night, was introduced to me by Karasu-san.

From what I heard, one of Karasu-san's acquaintances was the landlord, and Karasu-san herself was also renting a room here. It annoyed me a bit that her room was a warehouse (apparently a storage place for strange magical items and costumes), but I couldn't complain. The rent had rocketed to 50000 yen, but it was a cheap price for a 10 square meter apartment with one bedroom, a kitchen, a loft and a unit bath.

It had been more than a week since I looked at that paranormal house with Yoishi.

It was a Sunday afternoon, on a rare day with no part-time work and no lectures—

I opened the window and took in the pleasant breeze as I sprawled out in my empty room.

At any rate, the previous week had passed by quickly.

First, I cried to my big sister to borrow some money to move here, then did so immediately. I didn't want to enter that house ever again, and while it was expensive having to hire movers, it was worth it. Furthermore, this apartment's walls were so thin they made you almost want to pick up your neighbors' ringing phones, which made it feel like you were among living people. You could greet gloomy people in the hallways, and if you opened the window, you could hear the lackadaisical voice of the bamboo pole merchants. Basically, this place was overflowing with life. For me, that was extremely important. I'd been drained of mental energy to the extremes, and I needed the comfort of living amidst people more than anything else.

I didn’t meet Yoishi again.

That night, I gave her a lift to the family restaurant and parted ways. Everything about her was a mystery, other than the fact that she was a high school student and that her real name was Yoishi Mitsurugi. I spoke with her for a little bit as I pedaled hard back to the train station as if running away, but in the end, I never found out what was going on with that house. She didn't try to explain, and I wasn't in any mood to ask.

However, I had a strange conviction that there was something dangerous there. I was the one who heard the creepy noises every night, and I even got a countdown, but somehow, I made up my mind because of Yoishi's one phrase: "This place is the real deal." I immediately thought that this was not a place I could deal with. If you think about it that way, it's thanks to her that I was able to make the decision to put myself in a peaceful place like this, but—

It's true what they say: Once on shore, we pray no more.[6]

Now that it was all in the past, I was truthfully somewhat curious.

What did she notice?

What was the countdown all about?

And just who was Yoishi anyway? It was hard to explain, but she

seemed different from the average occult maniac. She wasn't just getting a thrill by being close to danger, but she was also a daredevil who didn't hesitate stepping into areas that a person's instincts would say are dangerous—in other words, she had a sense of uneasiness about her that couldn't just be explained as someone who wanted to die. Whenever she said something, I felt like the world I believed and lived in was about to collapse.

Sometimes I would take a peek at Ikaigabuchi, but Yoishi never appeared in any threads.

And of course, no one replied to the thread I'd started anymore, and it got buried deep to the point where it was hard to find. Krishna-san descended upon various threads, but they never touched on me or Yoishi's case. I was tempted to write that it was real, but I had no means of proving myself, and I still felt a little uncertain about the whole thing, at the same time, I buried myself in my normal daily life again.

Indeed — The everyday normal continued.

Increased rent and utility bills that can't wait. My scholarship alone was insufficient, meaning I had to start working part-time in earnest soon, so I started a part-time job at an Italian restaurant near the station. I also had to pay back the moving funds that I'd borrowed from my big sis. So I started working whenever I had no lectures. My urban survival began with a week of exhausting physical exertion and forced workplace smiles, and in an instant--

A week had flown by, and it was that sort of day.

My first university lecture in a while had just ended, and I was stuffing my textbooks into my bag, when I suddenly realized an unknown girl was staring at me.

She was short, yet her breasts were big enough to be noticeable through her clothes. Her hair was bobbed and cut straight like a Zashiki-Warashi's[7], she had a baby-face that resembled that of a middle-schooler, and her red-framed glasses really suited her.

"Who is that?"

When I stared right back at her, she cleared her throat once and came over to me.

She started taking something out of her pocket, then put it back. I figured it was some sort of paper. She walked over to me, standing bolt upright, but in the end, never took out that piece of paper. She had a somewhat vexed expression as she glared at me (although her baby-ish face made it lose its bite), she then clicked her tongue and turned away.

"H-Hey, wait." I couldn't stop myself from calling out to her. "If you need something, just say it."

In reply, the bobbed-haired girl turned back around and said, "Moron."

"Mo-Moron?"

No matter how much of a mild-mannered and sincere of a person I was, I wasn't one to stand being insulted by a girl I'd never met before.

"Why are you being so rude? What's your name? What grade are you?"

I asked, but she simply snapped back, "Shut up."

"It's your fault in the first place." Then she pointed her small index finger at me. "People like you are the reason these things keep happening. Learn your place, fool."

"Fool? You..."

After that, she rapidly asked me.

"Do your shoulders ache? Do your ears ring? Are you able to sleep at night?"

Was she some sort of doctor's apprentice? I mean, did this university even have a medical school?

While I was bewildered, the girl finally pulled out the piece of paper

from her pocket. She thrust it in front of my nose. Before I could even pick it up, she ran off like a rabbit, and by the time I picked it up, she had already left the classroom.

"...The hell was that?"

In the emptied classroom, I picked up the paper and looked down at it.

It was like a handmade business card.

It merely read—

"Beatnik Research Club President - Kurimoto Shiina"

—and the location of the Beatnik Research Club, situated in the western club building.

◯

That night, I saw a dream.

In my dream, I was still living in that house.

That old three-story mountain cottage-style building by the river bank.

There, I was looking at myself. It was like an out-of-body experience with my body floating in space, and I was gazing down upon a different "me" living my life. The "me" directly below showed no signs of noticing me and continued to live normally. It seemed I was looking a bit into the past. “I", who still didn't know the fear of the midnight sounds, was living there unconcernedly. *Hey, give up on this house,* I wanted to call out to him, but as a person just drifting through the air in a dream, there was nothing I could do. All I could do was stare blankly.

Eventually, I noticed that Yoishi was sitting next to "me." The two of us were sitting together on the old sofa I'd picked up after moving. The two of us didn't speak to each other, we just did what we liked. "I" was yawning as I watched TV, while she was just quietly reading an old-looking book.

It was just a dream, so I was free to make up any situation I wanted, but it's true that if I were to live together with her, it would be strange, since neither of us would really interfere with the other.

Eventually, the "me" down there got bored of the TV and proceeded to stretch, wash his face, and brushed his teeth. He should have studied a little or something, but he was going to bed now. As I observed myself as an outsider, I realized that I was a pretty

worthless person. I boasted that I would rebuild my family's downtrodden lumber business, departed Shizuoka in opposition to my father and big sister, failed to get into the seminar I wanted, and then just wandered occult sites. Plus, I hadn't even written a single letter to my mother, who was the only one who agreed with my decision to move to Tokyo, and who I'd promised to send letters to. And in the end, I got lured by the cheap price and moved into a haunted house, running into a denpa girl along the way. I wanted to slap myself.

As I sighed and glared, "I" quickly curled up in my bedroom. I turned off the lights as if I couldn't see Yoishi, even though she was in the room. Yoishi seemed to notice the lights had gone off, as she closed her book and stared off into space.

I'd floated down to Yoishi, thinking I'd turn the light on for her.

"It's about time."

I had a horrible feeling when Yoishi said that.

And then—in the darkness illuminated only by the moonlight, I heard that sound.

From somewhere, the sound of something being scraped.

An ominous melody ringing across the border connecting this world and the other.

My whole body stiffened as I heard the sound, as if something somewhere was trying to crawl out of some sealed space. It was like watching those supernatural shows on TV, where they set up a camera in rooms where ghosts are rumored to appear.

This is a nightmare, isn't it?

I need to wake up as soon as possible.

Because, if I stay here like this—

I would end up seeing the "something" that was engraving numbers into this house.

I frantically tried to wake up. I waved my limbs around trying to touch something, but I couldn’t wake myself from the dream. It was like my body had been caught by some black hand that had seeped out of a different world. Feeling the despair of having been locked in a room with no exit, in the dream where only my ragged breathing echoed— I suddenly found myself next to Yoishi.

On the old, leather sofa, I held Yoishi in my arms.

I played with her body, as if I were trying to stain both of my palms with Yoishi's body heat. That was my wish, and yet, it wasn't. I mean, of course, I had some interest in girls as a regular eighteen-year-old boy, but my lust wasn't this twisted. I wasn't the type to release my sexual desires by turning myself into an unseen existence. I should have had that much reason left in me.

However—Yoishi showed no signs of fear.

If anything, she was in a state of ecstasy. Her expression was dangerous. I felt my rational mind flap its wings and fly away. I licked Yoishi's skin. I groped her breasts through her clothes. I lusted all over her soft body with the tips of my fingers. I pulled up her long skirt, exposing her pale thighs. Yoishi's eyes were barely open. Her lips were slightly parted, revealing her white teeth. *Stop. Stop. Stop,* I screamed from within my body, but I couldn't restrain the abnormal, sexual desire that was boiling up inside me.

However, the moment I placed a hand on her pale wrists—

I almost screamed. My arms were not ones I'd become accustomed to seeing, but were long and thin, like that of an old man. Those sleeves were gray and worn. I was wearing an old suit. I thought I smelled the scent of some cologne. I stretched out my trembling arms straight up to my face and stroked my cheek, my nose and my lips. And the feeling was horrifyingly unlike anything I had ever known. It was definitely that of someone else—and I knew whose it was.

Him.

That man standing in the corner of my vision. And at last, my face tilted against my will. I turned to the front window, where the

moonlight was shining in —and there, my eyes locked with the man hanging over Yoishi.

At that moment—

I lost consciousness.

◯

I awoke with a violent shudder.

I was in my new apartment, lit by freakishly blinding fluorescent lights.

On the table next to me was an empty convenience store meal box I'd just eaten, and an unfinished bottle of oolong tea. A bag full of university textbooks and notebooks were scattered near my pillow. There were cheap curtains on the sash leading to the small veranda, which swayed from the night breeze coming through a small gap in the sash.

I let out a deep breath.

My heart was still pounding.

I came home from my part-time job, ate some food, and then fell asleep at some point it seemed.

Stop fucking freaking me out. Cursing no one in particular, I grabbed the bottle and gulped down about a third or so of the remaining oolong tea. I felt so incredibly thirsty that even lukewarm oolong tea tasted delicious. After finishing it, I finally calmed down, and ruffled my hair as I exhaled sharply.

"...Calm down. It was just a dream. It's only been about two weeks since that thing happened. It's not surprising that I still have some fear somewhere in my heart. That's why I saw that dream, that's all it is."

I mumbled in an effort to convince myself, but my heart still didn't stop pounding. I could still vividly feel Yoishi's soft body in both my hands.

It was then that I realized something had been ringing in my head the whole time.

It was a small, but definite warning sound, like a phone from the neighbor, like a cell phone left ringing in my pocket. What...what's bothering me? I looked around the room. There was only a barren room there, with barely any furniture and fresh white wallpaper surrounding me. Nothing had changed since I went to sleep. However, the bell inside my head kept ringing relentlessly.

"What the hell is it?"

I stood up and looked around the room again. There was nothing out of the ordinary. The aftereffects of the scary dream were just lingering inside me, that's all. I was trying to make myself believe that, when I noticed it. Next to the wall was a ladder leading to the small loft. The light for the loft was different, so that place alone remained dark. Just then, I felt something cold travel down my spine.

Why did I end up picking a place with a loft?

That dark area, where someone could unexpectedly peep in from at any moment, amplified my unpleasant thoughts. But apparently, the warning alarm inside me felt like it was directed straight at the loft. I mustered the courage to look up, and the warning sound grew louder. I swallowed once and turned on the light next to the ladder to the loft. I placed a foot on the ladder, climbing it one step at a time. Then, with all my resolve, I peered into the loft.

The loft was, of course, empty. The only thing there was a cheap sleeping bag I'd bought in place of a futon, and a few books scattered about.

"Haaah," I breathed a sigh of relief, and was about to climb back down, when I noticed it. On the other side of the sleeping bag, on the furthest wall at the back, I saw something. Scratches. Two lines had been violently etched, one perpendicular to the other.

I let out a silent scream and fell off the ladder. My knees and shoulders made a horrible noise when they struck the ground, but I didn't care. I somehow managed to grab my wallet and cell phone

before running out of the apartment.

Those weren't just lines. Definitely not lines——that was...

"2" ("二"). The number "2" ("二").

Even after I moved places—the countdown still continued.

I ran out into the residential area at night, and for the time being, ran to the nearest convenience store in search of light. As I ran, I tapped my cell phone, accessing Ikaigabuchi. I looked at the forum from end to end. I didn't care if it was Karasu-san, Suu-san, Yoishi or anyone else. I searched frantically to see if anyone I knew was posting. Then I found it. In a thread titled [Mysterious Dimension ☆ Ise Grand Shrine], "Yoishi" had posted a mere thirty minutes ago. Ignoring the serious discussion of how to see the Yata no Kagami[8] at the inner section of the shrine, I posted:【Hey, Yoishi. Please help me! 】

The occult maniacs who had their debate interrupted made all sorts of derisive comments at my tactless post, but I ignored them and kept posting: 【Yoishi! Are you reading this? Talk to me. He's still haunting me.】

However, Yoishi didn't reply, and all I did was anger the Ise Grand Shrine maniacs. Even after reaching the convenience store, I continued checking other Ikaigabuchi forum threads in the parking lot. I tried posting in random threads that Yoishi might find interesting. I told her I was in danger and to contact me immediately. But I might have posted a little too much, as the entire forum soon rose up in arms, calling me a troll. If I got banned, I'd have trouble contacting her, so I started responding, *"No, I'm not trolling! I'm seriously in trouble!"* but people just coolly responded, *"Yep, he's trolling."* Eventually, someone called me a 'DQN'[9] and I exploded, writing in all caps: *"YOU OCCULT MANIAC SCUM!"* which set the thread ablaze. I was being bombarded with all kinds of abuse; It was like a 100 vs 1 flame war. Right as I was starting to feel like the world was against me, and the moment I was about to throw my mobile phone away, I saw the post:

【Are you Nagi?】

Someone had posted that message.

When I looked at their name, it said "Krishna."

That miraculous name was like a gift from heaven, one that almost made me crumble to the ground. I tried to type back a response, but my fingers were trembling too much.

As I struggled to reply, Krishna-san posted again.

And—

It stated:

【Come to the place written on the card I gave you that afternoon.】

5

It was past two o'clock late at night.

I'd left my bicycle behind, so I plodded my way to the university on foot.

Of course, the front gate was closed, and the security guard eyed me suspiciously. As if to escape his gaze, I went in a circle and followed the zelkova trees on my left along the university wall. After a short walk, I reached the western building, which housed the Beatnik Research Club room.

"Kurimoto Shiina — Krishna."

I was so stupid.

I had realized nothing.

To think that the administrator of Ikaigabuchi, Krishna, was a person who attended the same university as me—

And for that baby-faced girl to be Krishna, was unimaginable.

I went straight to the clubroom building on the far end, and as I entered, I was met with surprise. There were still quite a few students left inside, and some club rooms were still noisy. *Is this some kind of nightless city?*, I thought exasperatedly, but hearing such characteristic small talk, I felt ashamed of myself for being frightened by ghostly disturbances. At the same time, I felt pathetic for getting involved in such a silly ruckus. I walked with heavy feet to the Beatnik Research Club on the third floor. Upon arriving, I saw light shine through the frosted glass. I knocked on the door and heard a familiar voice, so I introduced myself. "It's 'Nagi.' Nagito Yamada."

"It's open."

"Excuse me."

Opening the door, I found myself facing a bleak, dimly lit, concrete-walled room of about sixteen square meters.

There was a single steel cabinet placed against a wall.

In the middle was a relatively large worktable.

And around it were four chairs, three of which were occupied by both men and women.

At the center—

Was the baby-faced girl who'd given me a business card in the classroom a few days ago.

Her red-framed glasses were still the same, but she was dressed in a kind of black dyed shrine maiden outfit, paired with tall wooden clogs, she sat perched on a chair. This suited her too well. I had no interest in such types, but I came frighteningly close to understanding how people who liked lolis and cosplay felt.

"Uh, hey, I mean, hello, are you Krishna-san?" I asked, and the girl nodded with an extremely disdainful expression.

"I warned you to leave that house immediately."

"Huh?"

"You didn't hear anything from Karasu-san?"

"Nothing at all."

Krishna-san cutely clicked her tongue and said, "Anyway, get in."

I entered and looked around the room again—next to the small occult site admin was a woman who seemed to be in her late twenties dressed in simple white clothes, who in no way looked like a student, and a bald, middle-aged man wearing monk attire, who also looked nothing like a student.

"Eh...huh...um."

I didn't know how to greet them, so I just stood awkwardly at the entrance. Krishna-san then made a motion with her small chin to “Sit down there. *I sat down on the chair that had been prepared for me, and when I did so, the middle-aged monk suddenly came up behind me and grabbed my shoulders with his thick arms.*

"Um... Wait, what's going on?"

Thereupon, Krishna-san asked me while pushing up her glasses:

"Why are you willingly trying to peek at the other side?"

And from there, her raging lecture had begun.

"Are you listening? As long as we don't peek from our side, we won't be seen by the other side. You can have an interest in the occult, It’s an admirable human quality to want to know about things you don't understand. Still, the other side's business is the other side's. To them, not being able to see them does not count as an excuse. Even though humans aren't able to see them, we have enough power to be able to feel them. If you think a place is creepy, you should immediately understand that there's something you can't see, and pay it due respect."

In the face of her stern gaze, even I, the fool, could understand.

"So, basically, I've been possessed?" I asked tearfully.

"At this rate, you're pretty screwed."

Her expression became even sterner, and I stiffened.

"Krishna-san."

The woman in the white dress called out to her. She had no make-up on, and held a strangely-shaped rosary.

"It's almost inside."

...What? What is almost inside?

"Could you remove it here?"

"I can try."

The two finished their strange conversation.

"Wait, Krishna-san. Who are these two?" I asked while trying to escape the rather strong monk.

"Ikaigabuchi investigators," she bluntly replied.

"Investigators?"

"I'll explain later. Just shut up and obey."

"It's pointless. The main body isn't here." I heard from a feminine voice, seemingly far away.

"It seems we will have to go to that house, after all."

"That does seem to be the case."

The middle-aged man and Krishna-san's voice sounded like a record playing at low speed.

I'd started to go limp. The monk was strong, but that wasn't the only reason. It was as if I didn't realize that I was on the verge of collapse under the burden of a heavy load—and as soon as I realized that, all my sensory organs frantically tried to show me my level of fatigue. A feeling of fatigue covered my entire body, as if my whole body was sinking into a bottomless mud pit.

"You can't move? You'll be ok, just don't move," At the end of Krishna-san's strangely gentle voice, I lost consciousness.

To be honest, I don't remember much after that. I think I was loaded into a car. And then, I think there was a lot of shaking. My consciousness came back when I felt a familiar sense of coldness on my skin, one that seemed to want to wring me dry. My body was still heavy and my consciousness still felt muddy, but my survival instincts seemed to scream that wherever this was, it was bad news.

When I came to, I was in front of that house.

The middle-aged priest was carrying me on his back, and we were walking up the stairs leading to the entrance.

—No way! Hell no! I don't want to come back here again! I wanted to shout, but in reality, I couldn't even move my fingertips anymore. Not caring for my will, I was carried by the middle-aged man, and I was now again in front of the entrance to that house alongside Krishna-san and the white-clothed woman. Krishna-san easily opened the door. I was sure I'd locked it, but it opened without a sound. And an ethereal light glowed from inside.

"Who's there?" Krishna-san asked sharply.

I forced my resistant eyelids shut.

—No! I don't want to see them!

I don’t care who it was, I don't want to deal with this anymore. I give up. I decided right then and there. If I was able to see the sunrise tomorrow, I would go straight back home to Shizuoka. It was impossible for me to live alone in the demonic city of Tokyo after all. I wanted to rebuild my family's business and came to Tokyo to study for it, but I was too much of a wuss to live alone. I was better off living in the countryside, surrounded by family and friends. My father and sister, who were against my decision were right after all. Ahh, my mother alone supported me, but now I just felt apologetic toward her. But I tried. I did my best. I couldn't have imagined this turn of events, and I couldn’t cope with it, so—

"Close the door on your way in," someone answered from inside the house.

I recognized that voice. That cold, clear and somewhat definitive manner of speaking.

"If you want to know what's to happen, then please abide."

Right—this voice.

"Yoishi," my whisper echoed through the silence.

"Yoishi?"

Krishna’s voice, which sounded as if it was suspicious of her, overlapped with Yoishi's lackadaisical voice saying, "Good evening."

"There was a spare key near the faucet below, so I used that to come in."

"Let's go in."

Hearing Krishna-san's decisive call, the middle-aged man entered the foyer, still carrying me. He took off his shoes and continued on to the living room. Krishna-san and the woman in white followed behind. When I looked over the middle-aged man's shoulder, I saw Yoishi sitting with her hands clasping one knee in the middle of the empty living room, and a lighted candle in a small empty can besides her; That was the source of the faint light.

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

Krishna sounded as if she were scolding her, but Yoishi still answered lackadaisically.

"Be very quiet. If you brought that person here, then you already understand what's going on in this house as well."

"Yoishi...I see," groaned Krishna-san.

"So you're 'Yoishi.' You're the girl that occasionally posts on Ikaigabuchi." Yoishi remained silent, but Krishna clicked her tongue and continued. "I have no problem with you having an interest in the occult. But there is a difference between having an interest and actually walking in the abyss. You should be aware that you're messing around in a very hazy boundary line."

"Nothing to worry about," flatly responded Yoishi to Krishna-san's harsh tone. "I'm confidently aware of that much, at least."

...Wow. She's undeterred by Krishna-san's threatening attitude.

This is why girls are scary. My big sis was scary, too, and when my mother snapped, she was scarier than my dad.

However, Krishna-san responded somewhat sadly.

"I understand — I get it. I've seen kids like you before. That's why I say this. People who harbor expectations from the abyss of darkness always drag others into it, whether they intend to or not. That's a very—very dangerous thing."

The middle-aged man slowly lowered me down from his shoulder and leaned me against the wall. As I sat there, I could do nothing but forcibly listen to their incomprehensible conversation. My powerless body felt like it was being dragged about, and I was fully aware of my endless sense of helplessness. What happened here, what was happening here, and what was about to happen here, it's as if all of it went against the rules I'd lived by thus far. I could do nothing here. I could only listen to their creepy conversation and be a bystander to their lurid theatrics. However, the desire to get away from it all was stronger than my desire to learn the truth. I just wanted to get out as

soon as possible to a brighter place.

"Krishna-san." Just then, the monk interrupted both of them. "It's begun."

Along with his words, that sound began.

From somewhere in the building, that sound echoed.

...scratch. scratch, scratch, scratch. sssscraaaaaaaaaaaatcccchhhhhh.

That sound alone echoed, as if overpowering everything. *Scratch scratch crunch crunch*, something creaking somewhere. Something made a carving noise. The sound was the loudest thing I'd ever heard. It was almost as if something was trying to crush this place from outside and I desperately closed my eyes. I was completely in tears, and the world was filled with nothing but creepy noises.

—Please, stop this already. Forgive me.

As I was about to tearfully shout that out loud, I heard Yoishi's voice.

"How lovely." Her happy voice entered my ears, and I felt enraged.

—Lovely? Are you fucking insane? It's beyond sanity to sneak into a house alone in the middle of the night with a ghost milling about and just sit there with nothing but a candle. Ahh, I get it, you're that kind of person. You're like a friend of ghosts. Then great. Can you tell your friend to stop scaring the shit out of me? I'm sorry for barging in on your house. But I didn't know. I cleaned up after myself and left already, so tell them to stop bothering me already. I mean, tell your friend to stop following me to my new place and stop giving me countdowns. I don't know what sort of grudge they have against the world, but I'm completely unrelated to it, so stop, tell them that.

Of course, my body wouldn't move and neither would my mouth, but I begged Yoishi with all my might.

However, Yoishi didn't care for my feelings at all.

"Hey, are you scared?"

I heard an inexplicable voice full of expectation in my ear. It seemed Yoishi had come right next to me, but I kept my eyes firmly shut. Instead, I screamed at her with my soul.

—Of course I'm fucking scared. I'm super fucking scared. My body won't move and some incomprehensible sound is echoing through my head, and the only people around me are psychos and ghosts. Right, this house only has psychos in it now. A psychotic administrator that gathers and edits creepy articles, a psychotic woman holding some bizarre religious items despite being old enough to know better, some psychotic baldy who seems to only have bodybuilding as a hobby. And then there's you. A psychotic girl with straight cut-bangs covered in black. On top of that, there's some gloomy douche of a ghost that never shows itself but does annoying pranks like carve numbers. Seriously, cut it out. Are all of you actually enjoying an emergency offline meeting here right now? You're all just waiting for me to piss my pants, aren't you? Come on. Knock it off. I've apologized. I was wrong. I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to see those numbers anymore. Next is "1" ("—"), and then what? What's next? I don't want to know. I mean if you're gonna kill me, do it at once. Stop chasing and dragging me around—

—However.

At some point, the sound had stopped.

My eyes were tightly shut, and the outside of my pitch-black world was filled with silence.

What? How? What happened—

I became worried that everyone had left, but I was also afraid that if I were to open my eyes, something else would be there.

Still, I couldn't just stay like this. I was already exhausted. I'd begun to feel reckless. If you're gonna kill me, just do it. I don't want to be hunted to death like this. Just give me a bad end already.

I opened my tearful eyes. But, all I saw was the same house I lived in as before. And everyone was still there.

Krishna-san stood in front of the door to the bedroom.

The woman dressed in white stood in the middle of the living room with her eyes closed.

The monk lingered by my side, and Yoishi alone stared at me emotionlessly.

Everyone was standing at the same spot they were before I had closed my eyes. I met my tearful gaze with Yoishi's eyes, who nodded once in return. She then looked straight down.

I followed her sight.

It focused at my feet.

As if cutting across the space between both of them, a thick scratch had been carved into the floor.

"AH, AHHHHHHHHH," I screamed, pulling my sluggish body away from it. But I was paralyzed with fear, and could only move in a strange, squirming way. However, I got out of there anyway, mobilizing everything I could to move.

I already knew it was coming.

It was—"1" ("一").

"It's '1'. It's all over. I'm tired of this, I'm going home, back to Shizuoka."

"Calm down, Nagi-kun," I heard Krishna-san's voice call out to me. Before I realized it, she'd started calling me Nagi-kun, but I couldn't care less at the moment, and continued to crawl away. I was desperately trying to flee from that number.

"I won't! What's the point of me staying here!? What's going to happen next!? What's going to happen to me!?"

"Pull yourself together, Nagi-kun," Krishna-san's voice sounded out once more—*Ouch*. Goddamnit, it must have been the monk. A tremendous thud echoed down my back. Then, the woman dressed in white started chanting something unintelligible. It was filled with strange rhymes I'd never heard before, countless words whose power

were making my head go insane—

As I frantically flailed about, trying to escape, suddenly a long black skirt blocked my path.

It was Yoishi, dressed in her usual black clothes.

"Move," I said in a trembling voice, but this time her eyes weren't glass beads, nor was there a glimmer to be seen, rather, this time, Yoishi had a look of fascination as she reached out to me with her hand.

"Give me that thing."

.....That thing?

"The thing you're holding," she said, and I looked at what I was holding in my hand.

It was the key to my apartment. It was the key I'd left in my pocket. I was holding it with my back hand, and there were wood shavings stuck at the end. For a while, I didn't know what that meant. But then the wood shavings fell off and landed on the "1" ("一") that had been ominously cut at my feet.

"Wha..."

—It can't be.

—That's impossible; there's no way.

"Yes," said Yoishi in a whisper. "The one carving numbers into this house… was always you."

With those words—

My consciousness went completely blank.

6

"In short, it was just a schema."

It was on an evening, about five days later.

Krishna-san was talking to me in the Beatnik club room at the university.

"Or rather, a reverse schema. You see, that house makes people uneasy."

Krishna-san and I were facing each other in the clubroom, with the beautiful evening sun shining through..

"The house...makes people uneasy?" I repeated like a fool, and Krishna nodded in confirmation.

"In the past, Ikaigabuchi investigated similar places too— there are many reported cases around the world where the structure of a building causes strange psychological changes in the people who live there. Some of them turn into murder scenes, and there have been many cases of people who lived there turning to crime. There's no actual scientific proof for the correlations, but I'm of the opinion that they exist. People's minds, after all, are unstable things that can be manipulated in any direction by the slightest load."

"W-Wait a second. What exactly do you mean by that?"

"Basically, that building wasn't built for people."

Those words sent a chill through me like I was gripped by the heart.

"I'll avoid saying their name here. But the architect who built that building was a promising young man who had won several architectural awards since his university days."

As she spoke in remembrance, Krishna-san was illuminated by the golden sunlight, and her beautiful straight-bobbed black hair glittered.

"He was supposedly a very serious person. Maybe too serious. He was the type of person that wondered what buildings are—and he would lose sleep pondering over that. Above all he loved seeing his clients happy, so he put his ingenuity to the test. One day, however, he realized the futility that arose when one person asked him for a different design, and he watched the house he'd put his blood and soul into demolished in the name of 'renovation.' Families change. Preferences change. It's an inevitability in life that can't be avoided, but he couldn't bear it."

—If you took care of it properly, it would last over a hundred years. — Sometimes, people should adapt to the building.

"Leaving behind those words, he vanished from that atelier one day. His family reported him missing, but he was never seen again and was eventually declared dead a few years later. That was over thirty years ago. That atelier was his final work, and had at some point been dubbed 'The Wish-fulfilling House.'"

Krishna-san pointed out the third-floor window, to a visible residential area.

"This country tossed aside countless traditions with the Westernization of the Meiji era. One of these traditions, I believe, is housing. Tiled roofs became scarcer over the years, and the number of buildings that can be lived in and passed down through several generations has become rare. We have entered an age of mass production and mass consumption. We weren't inheriting treasures anymore, believing instead that you could reset life every few decades. That way, we could satisfy the economic activities of supply and demand. But I can't help but feel that this is weakening something that was inherently important to the people of this country."

That story made me recall something.

My father said something similar.

It takes thirty years to grow one strong, healthy tree. And yet, the Japanese lumber industry found itself in danger of going out of business in the face of massive imports of cheap lumber from emerging economies. It wasn't that he was worried about his job. He was afraid that the idea—that you could get an unlimited amount of cheap wood—would become ingrained in the minds of the people of this country. In the past, people would pray to the gods of forests, cut trees while offering gratitude towards them, then carefully built houses with that wood. Whenever they rebuilt, they tried to reuse the original wood whenever possible. Even on this earthquake-riddled island nation, Houryuuji temple[10] has retained its majestic appearance even after a thousand years. He said that the skill of the carpenters who understood the finest details and characteristics of the wood was, of course, amazing, but what was more important was their reverence toward nature's gifts.

I always agonized over having been born into a family whose business dealt with lumber.

Did I take care of the buildings I lived in as I grew up? Did I ever think about the feelings of those who built them? I thought of the construction sites for renovation and new buildings I saw every day within this grand city, and wondered if a day would ever come when his wish would be fulfilled.

According to Krishna-san, everything originated from the design of that house, which was the intent of the architect. When an architectural friend of Krishna-san took a look at the house, they noted that while it looked simple, it used extremely high-level techniques. Even the rattling of the house was due to the fact that the beams and other structural elements had some mechanisms in them to make the structure squeak, in order to protect the building from wind, rain and earthquakes.

"The meaningful space under the stairs is the center-point of a sturdily built house. The kitchen, which gets overused the most, was deliberately omitted. The living spaces were deliberately cut off from one another. It was certainly a house that was built to last."

Krishna-san mumbled as she pushed her red-framed glasses up.

"Normally, houses should revolve around the inhabitants, but not in this case. The inhabitants inevitably begin to feel like the house was built for something other than themselves. This causes a disturbance in the mind’s equilibrium. What do you think would happen when a boy who'd just recently arrived in Tokyo with few friends, decides to live there?"

"So, in other words, it had nothing to do with ghosts?"

"Indeed, you're probably much more mentally fatigued than you realize, having moved to a city alone and all. Then there was that sound. You must have endured it at first, despite feeling afraid. But eventually, you reached a limit, and then what do you think a person would do?"

Under her glasses, Krishna-san gazed at me with her big eyes.

"They create a reason to escape from their fears."

"Create...a reason?"

"Yes. They create a reason for the sounds. In other words, you were subconsciously carving numbers into the walls of the house at night."

"But—"

I was speechless, and Krishna-san leaned in closer.

"Think about it, Nagi-kun. Where does fear come from? It comes from the unknown. That’s why people study and learn. They research inexplicable things to escape from the fear of the unknown. All human wisdom has been built up to escape fear. Cooking developed out of fear of starvation, clothing developed out of fear of external temperatures, and buildings and weapons developed out of fear of external enemies. Everything began with human fears. You thought there was an inexplicable sound at night. However, no matter how much you searched the house, you couldn't find the source of the noise. Of course not. You'd have to know that the house was deliberately designed to make sounds, but you had no way of knowing that. So then what did you do? Cornered, you created a reason for the sounds. In other words, a reverse schema."

Is that even possible?

No—it had to be. Otherwise, how would the number "4" ("四") have been carved into the back of a shoe I'd been wearing all along? I was the one wearing it, so it had to have been me.

My lower body was trembling. Another self acting independently of my will. No, I was terrified of the fact that I was not in full control of all my functions.

"Well—"

Krishna-san sat back down and sighed.

"It was also my fault for knowing there was such a property nearby, and neglecting it. I'm sorry," she said, as she bowed her bobbed head, which flustered me.

"No, no, no, please don't. It all started with me being greedy because I wanted to skimp on living expenses and didn't immediately move out. Please raise your head," I frantically said.

"Mmhmm, it was your fault," she nodded readily. "There are no shortcuts for granting wishes."

I had no excuse at all, and I just hung my head.

However, I realized there was one question that was still unanswered.

"Hm, wait a second? Then why were the numbers counting down?"

Krishna-san shook her head, saying 'I don't know.'

"Huh? You don't know?" When I asked back, Krishna-san's big eyes glimmered with amusement for some reason.

"I don't know. I don't know, but, I think you probably carved a '10' ("十") on the wall."

"A '10' ("十")? Not a '7' ("七")?"

"Right, the number '10' ("十"). But maybe it wasn't meant to be a

number to begin with. It could have been anything for you. Carving anything on the wall as the source of the sounds would have alleviated your fear. But here's where a certain coincidence occurred, which was the cause of this incident. There was an accidental scratch on the spot where you carved, right from the start. You subconsciously remembered carving '10' ("十") somewhere. Yet when you woke up, it overlapped with the scratch that was originally there to create '7' ("七"). And that was what gave birth to something else inside you—a 'ghost'."

...Ahh.

I recalled the first time I saw the numbers, the feeling of uncontrollable anxiety. It was the feeling of knowing that something was happening that I couldn't cope with or understand.

"After that, you continued carving numbers into the wall in accordance with the sound you heard after sleeping. The countdown was probably because of your subconscious desire. If the numbers went up, they would go on forever. I think it was a hope that somewhere along the line it would end one day." Krishna-san then added with a mischievous look on her face, "But you're quite simple. If the countdown had truly finished, you may have ended your life. I'm glad we made it on time."

And with that, she showed me a soft smile for the first time.

"Alright? I hope you've learned your lesson to not enter the world of ghosts out of pure curiosity. And you should respect all beings as well as the living. That's the main goal of Ikaigabuchi, after all."

And the Krishna-san who said such things with complete seriousness, was, as I had imagined, a pure and straightforward person.

Although—

She had a far more moe-like character look than that of a father or big brother.

◯

And with that, the complex, tangled and inexplicable threads had

been unraveled.

According to Krishna-san, she'd realized that the structure of the building caused anxiety in the psyche of its inhabitants the moment I made my first post. In an effort to keep it under wraps, she indirectly tried to tell me through Karasu-san—but Karasu-san was pretty careless to begin with, and she became drunk on top of that, so the important message never got across to me, which is why things had escalated to this point.

In any case, everything had been solved, so it was alright.

"I'll give you a warning, though." As I was leaving the house, Krishna-san had told me. *"You don't seem to have much tolerance for this field. Maybe I shouldn't be saying it as an administrator for an occult site, but you shouldn't delve into the occult genre too much. At the very least, make some friends in Tokyo you can confide in, get a girlfriend, and construct a proper, solid identity before you dabble in the occult as a hobby. And especially— don't get into it like that girl named Yoishi."*

...Which sounded about right.

As Krishna-san had said, Yoishi was abnormal. She had, how to put it, it was as if she had her feet planted firmly on the other side. Her bizarre level of focus on the paranormal was probably what helped shape those urban legends.

Stepping out of the western club building, I was met with an extraordinarily beautiful sunset.

The clear orange color shone straight to the depths of my soul.

Damn.

My tear glands had weakened completely after this incident, and I was about to burst into tears again out of of thankfulness for the peace I had gained. But with a gulp, I managed to hold back the tears. There were a lot of students about, and beyond the gate of the western club building was the affiliated high school. There were many high school girls going home as well. I didn't want to embarrass myself as a university student.

Just then—

I suddenly noticed one of them was staring at me.

She was a slender girl with beautiful black hair and fair skin. Her uniformed figure was dazzling, and the way she stood there made her strangely stand out from the rest of the world...

"Wait...what?" I eventually realized that I recognized the beautiful girl, and I couldn't restrain myself from running over to her. "Are you, by any chance, Yoishi?"

The girl then turned her glass bead-like eyes towards me.

"Oh, it's you."

Judging from her sleepy reply, she apparently wasn't staring at me.

Yoishi, dressed in her school uniform, stood out in a different way, partly because of her looks. As ever, she was someone far removed from the concept of ‘ordinariness’.

"Yo, how unexpected. You attend our affiliated school? What year are you in?" I spoke to her with a big smile on my face.

"That has nothing to do with you."

Yoishi's response was quite cold.

There was not a hint of that vitality-filled, ecstatic look in her eyes when she faced the paranormal.

"I hadn't come to school in a while—looks like I shouldn't have come at all," she muttered with a disgusted expression, but I noticed she didn't have the irritating odor from before. It seemed she'd taken a bath. Glossy black hair, an ironed white blouse, and a black tie. I narrowed my eyes as I gazed at the contrast, and said, "Pretty good."

"What is?"

"Ah, it’s better for you to live clean and dressed like that. And you look good in that uniform."

However, Yoishi turned her back to me, saying, "How absurd".

I intended to praise her, but it apparently just annoyed her.

"If you have nothing to say, then I'm going."

She turned on her heel, and I hurriedly stopped her.

"You were staring over there, did you want something from Krishna-san?"

"—Krishna." She reacted to that name, and her glass bead-like eyes immediately became full of life. "I see—then Ikaigabuchi is here."

As usual, she was very responsive to anything occult-related.

I then got carried away and dared to drive the conversation in that direction.

"I owe you a lot too. I was told all about that house. Didn't know something like delirium over a building even existed. I completely freaked out when I learned the truth."

I was probably on a high after having been freed from my bottled-up anxiety. I kept on rambling. I was babbling on and on. Everything I'd heard from Krishna-san, about the truth of the incident. I talked about the architecture of the house, the regret of the architect who disappeared, and even the housing problems that Japan was facing today, and so on.

However, Yoishi's reaction was worse than I'd expected.

Without turning towards me, she muttered emotionlessly, "That's good to hear," and walked away.

I was weirdly bothered by her somewhat lonely, slender back, that looked as if it would fly away if someone blew on it, so I followed her.

"You're looking kinda down, what's up? Is something still bothering you?"

The moment I said that, I remembered.

Come to think of it, that day, she said something to me at the house.

『Did you notice?』

...Right. What did she notice back then?

When I asked her that, she halted in her tracks.

She slowly turned around and answered with another question.

"Do you really want to know?"

Those cold black eyes were going to swallow me—

I heard something inside me say, don't do it.

From here on was a story you shouldn't know, it warned.

"You can still turn back," said Yoishi. "If you peek from this side, you'll end up being seen by the other side as well – It's that kind of story."

Those words, also spoken by Krishna-san, gave me goosebumps once more.

But—

I wonder why.

At this moment, a bizarre sense of excitement assailed me. I wanted to view the world as she did. I wanted to stand where she stood. I wanted to know the secret of how her words would always shake the world I believed in so much.

"I'll listen. So tell me," I said, and the moment I did, either my mind was playing tricks on me, or did Yoishi seem to have a slightly forlorn expression on her face?

However—

I would only later realize that this was the turning point.

A bizarre, grotesque, irredeemable story about wandering through the darkness of humanity began right here.

The journey around the boundary between this world and that one -- the journey around "Ikaigabuchi”(Abyss of the Spirit World), began at this very moment.

Eventually, Yoishi nodded once and then began to narrate.

"I’ve been wondering for a while. Why is it called 'The Wish-fulfilling House'?"

"Why? Because--"

"The title lacks a subject. Whose wish is it fulfilling?"

Those words gave me chills--

I immediately began regretting my decision.

"That house isn't a house of hope. The only thing I felt was intense malice from within," Yoishi whispered with the expression of a princess who'd been locked away in a dark castle for a millennium. "The architect with an unusual love of architecture who disappeared. The countdown that began with '7' ("七"). The mysterious space under the stairs. Someone's Wish-fulfilling House. There's only one answer that ties everything together."

My goosebumps wouldn't disappear.

What was she trying to say? What was going to come out of this?

The night-colored girl uttered with a glimmer in her dark eyes:

"The architect is still inside those stairs."

"W-wait a sec--"

"Of course, he’s not alive anymore. But then it all comes together.

Why there's a meaningless space under the stairs. Why it was named 'The Wish-fulfilling House.' And why the numbers began with '7' ("七")."

"Wait, that doesn't explain anything. It didn't start with '7' ("七"); it was originally '10' ("十"), and I just happened to write the number over an already existing scratch—"

"Wrong." Her words twisted my world. "You originally wrote '10' ("十"). That much is true. But there was never a scratch originally. Someone added a scratch that changed it to '7' ("七")."

"How...how can you say that happened?"

"I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"I saw your scrawled '10' ("十") had been scratched from the top, and turned into a '7' ("七")."

"Then...then, the reason Krishna-san kept saying there was no ghost in that house was because—"

Yoishi turned her eyes to the western club building, with a sad look on her face.

"Ignorance is bliss, after all."

...Ha.

"That is that person's kindness, something I lack."

...Hahaha.

Hahahahahahahahahahaha.

I had to laugh, or else I would have gone insane.

"You're lying, aren't you? You're making this all up, right? Oh, I got it! It's an occult story you read somewhere!" I continued laughing, praying that that was the case.

Yoishi looked at me sympathetically with a mournful gaze.

"It's all true. Because—" When I could no longer utter a word in rebuttal, Yoishi quietly landed the final blow. "After you were carried out, some man I'd never seen before was clicking his tongue on the stairs."

As the world went dark—

Only Yoishi's cold, sweet voice reverberated.

"Welcome...to the world on *this side*."

Case 02: Self-responsibility

Wish

1

—Darkness is as lukewarm and as bottomless as water.

So wrote an American mystery author in his only work translated to Japanese, *The Despair of the Baumkuchen*. I found that book in my high school library, and it was seriously good. I don't usually read books, so the fact that I'm saying this leaves no doubt about it. The author depicted a somewhat twisted world in a comical fashion, and it gave me the rare experience of not being able to put down a book. I tried to find that author's other works after I came to Tokyo, but I could never find anything. I eventually found out that the book I read of his was the only one that had been translated into Japanese. At the same time, I learned something very disappointing.

Right around the time I was reading his book in high school — far away in America, the author drunkenly fell from a dam and died.

They say it was a rainy night. There are those who say it was a suicide and others who say it was an accident, but as someone who'd read his book, I'd always found myself fascinated by the night that he'd stood upon the dam before his death.

Just dark, overflowing, bottomless water.

Perhaps he could not overcome his desire to learn what lay in the

depth of darkness?

I thought about such things—

Standing smack dab in the middle of bottomless darkness.

Indeed, darkness was like water.

It seemed to cling to you like a lukewarm substance, and it would quickly engulf any weak light like that from a penlight. And even more so in the abandoned hospital in the mountains, where the moon was hidden by clouds.

“Hey, shouldn’t we get back soon?”

I couldn’t deny my voice was trembling somewhat.

"—Hey, let's go back, shall we? I mean, the shattered glass is dangerous, and the concrete is beginning to crumble. And there may be some DQN who're out for blood around here."

I tried listing all the reasons to run away as I thought of them, however…

"There is no such thing as a safe haunted place in this world." Yoishi Mitsurugi muttered in her usual emotionless tone.

With penlight in one hand, Yoishi kept moving ahead in her school uniform.

Her summer high school uniform, with its black tie and white blouse seemed to melt into the darkness, inexplicably reminding me of a scene from a perverse film. If we weren't where we were, it may have been a fun event, but her beautiful, yet emotionless face scared me instead.

It was just past two o’ clock in the morning.

Yoishi Mitsurugi and I were visiting a certain abandoned hospital deep in the mountains of Hachiouji.

The windows were shattered on the linoleum tiled floor, with the

tattered remains of medical records covering them. Peeling wall posters hung at an angle, and with a penlight, they gave the appearance of a bloodied woman beckoning you. Worst of all, even though there's supposed to be nobody around except us, there was a strong sense of people hanging all over the place.

"Originally, there were several ghost stories set in this abandoned hospital." Yoishi's happy mumbling dramatically lowered the surrounding temperature. "Like the one that says that even though there's no electricity, low mechanical noises can be heard from the basement. One about the ghost of a female nurse wandering around, and another one about how an empty wheelchair begins to chase you..."

"Hey, stop it, this isn't the time or place to say that kind of stuff."

"But there was one interesting rumor amongst all those trite stories.," Yoishi's voice brimmed with vitality as it echoed through the darkness. "A rumor in which the number of people visiting this place changes."

"The number...changes?" I asked in return. "Is that such an unusual rumor? Like, people enter in a group of four and then somehow it's grown to five, right? I hear those all the time." I pointed out, and she muttered somewhat happily that it was the other way around.

"In the story I heard, the number goes down." I braced myself, as it seemed the conversation was suddenly starting to take a strange turn.

"If you enter with four, you'll end with three. If you go with five, you'll see four. And while they're inside the hospital, the remaining people become frantic about where the other person has gone, yet when they step out of the hospital, they're all there."

I felt like I heard something snap somewhere in the darkness.

Come to think of it, it seems like I've been hearing a lot of other sounds around me for a while now, sounds not made by us.

"The interesting thing about this story is the difference in perception. When people asked the person who'd vanished, they would say that

they were with everyone all along. Yet the others all agree that that person was not there. So then where did that one person go? Who were they with?"

I felt like the temperature was still dropping.

For a moment, I lost track of where I was. I should have been standing on concrete, but it felt like there was only pure darkness. And I could no longer be sure that I was speaking to Yoishi.

Ugh, how did I end up here?

I thought I'd learned my lesson the first time, why was I doing this again?

Or at least I should have learned. When her eyes and voice begin to show signs of life, something starts to warp. The walls of common sense and reality surrounding me tear down, and I sense the slimy intrusion of those that live on the other side of that wall.

As I shone the light alternately on Yoishi's back, which was moving ahead without hesitation, and at my own feet--

I was already on the verge of tears.

【The location of forbidden haunted spots is finally known!】

Everything began with that thread on the occult site "Ikaigabuchi."

The administrator, Krishna-san, had immediately deleted the thread, but for better or for worse, I ended up getting a glimpse of the thread. And I noticed certain details:

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* Deep in the mountains of Hachiouji.
* Abandoned hospital.
* People who entered this hospital are still hospitalize
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And then I remembered. It was talked about in the previous offline meeting, it was an offline meeting for investigating horror spots that Yoishi had once attended. If I recall correctly, they said it was for an abandoned hospital. And that something had happened there, and

that one of the participants only mumbled "Yoishi" afterwards, and that they were still in a psychiatric ward. Yoishi Mitsurugi posted denpa-like comments on the internet to begin with, but this incident solidified her reputation as an "accursed being." And over the past few weeks, rumors about Yoishi caught wind, and now she'd become a real life Sadako-like character online.

When you meet her, you die in seven days.

You become cursed just by talking to her.

Stories of her appearance circulated, such as being a one-armed man, a bloodstained woman, and so on. I was already fed up with all those random rumors.

Having been helped by her to some extent in the previous incident, I'd begun to feel that Yoishi wasn't as monstrous as the internet made her out to be. She was just a slightly odd high school girl who was very knowledgeable about the occult. Of course, she did have some denpa tendencies.

And with all that, I thought.

If I could figure out what exactly happened there back then, maybe her reputation would be restored.

After finishing my lecture that day, I quickly hurried to the west gate of the university. It was exactly 3 PM. The students from the affiliated school would be going home then. I didn't think Krishna-san would tell me anything, so I figured the fastest way would be to ask the person in question.

"Ah, hey, Yoishi!"

Eventually, the black-haired, white-faced girl showed up, and I called out to her from the shadow of a telephone pole.

"Wait, I want to ask you something."

When I rushed over and began talking to her, Yoishi turned to face me with a dazed look.

Her eyes were like glass beads as always, I thought, and I got right down to business.

"Have you ever been to an abandoned hospital in Hachiouji at an offline meeting of 'Ikaigabuchi'?"

For a while, she looked like she was remembering a childhood friend, and then she nodded.

"I went there."

"What happened to the other members that went?"

"It was an offline meeting. I haven't kept in touch."

"You know, one of them is still hospitalized. In a psychiatric ward, no less."

I told her what Zippo-san had told me at the previous offline meeting.

That someone he knew had gone with Yoishi.

And afterwards, he was still hospitalized, only mumbling the word: "Yoishi."

When I gave her a quick rundown, she just cocked her head to the side a bit.

"Is it not a big deal to you? What happened there anyway?"

"What happened...? I heard it was a haunted place, so I went, that's all."

"No, but you knew that hospital was dangerous, didn't you? Why didn't you stop them?"

"They were not the kind of people who would stop if I told them that ‘it was the real thing’."

".....Ungh."

That might be true.

I'd probably be even more tempted to go if someone said that to me.

But, no, no, no. That wasn't the problem. I found out last time that she was special. She was distinctly different from the average occult-lover. She must have known that hospital was truly dangerous. To know that, and to not warn people of that, what sort of person would do that?

And then she spoke, as if reading my expression.

"People are responsible for themselves at haunted places. Just like how it always is in this world."

The cold way she said it -- I don't know why, but it made me inexplicably angry.

"Do you not care? You're being treated like a denpa because you say things like that."

I ended up saying that.

But she simply sighed.

"You can't put a trap in people's mouths. Especially on the internet."

She muttered, and started walking away again.

As expected, I started feeling foolish. I was worried about her and tried to support her, but her attitude was quite rude. Still, as I watched her thin back as she walked away, I felt an irresistible sense of sadness. She was like a stranger that walked alone in the windswept wilderness. She was, in a sense, nothing more than a forsaken being, carrying all the pain and misery of the world by herself.

-- God, fine.

I ran after her again.

Hot on her heels, I decided to continue the conversation anyways.

"Then tell me the truth. What happened there? I'll post that for you."

And then Yoishi stopped, and peered at my face with genuine wonder.

"I don't understand what the point of that is."

"Shut up. Just tell me."

I said once more--

And something wriggled at the back of her dark eyes.

"Do you really want to know?"

Her empty gaze terrified me.

Something was beginning to open past those dark eyes that seemed to capture everything. At the same time, the safety device inside me began blaring warning sirens. Stop, someone yelled. I had a feeling an inescapable story was about to start.

"If you want to know, no matter what--"

Yoishi muttered, staring somewhere in the distance.

"It would be faster if we go there."

"Go…To that hospital?"

Yoishi nodded once, and then furrowed her brows slightly.

"To be honest, I don't really understand that place yet."

"...What?"

"My head hasn't been able to come with an answer that makes me go, 'Ahh, so that's how it is'. That sort of thing is quite rare."

I'd become speechless, and my legs froze, however, Yoishi added:

"From this point on, you’re responsible for your own actions."

...And so, Yoishi and I had arrived here after taking a train.

I see, so this is what they call reaping what you sow. I'm wandering around this creepy place because I thought I was going to help her without knowing my place.

In the dense darkness--

We'd descended to the basement of the hospital, and had progressed along a dark, damp, and humid passageway.

My breathing became more ragged than it should have been, possibly due to the dirty, stagnant air. My heart pounded so heavily it almost felt like it'd rip through my clothes, and I'd thought countless times that I couldn't go any further.

So why was I still hanging on?

Why couldn't I just grab Yoishi's hand and say we're leaving?

That moment--

I heard a snapping sound somewhere, again.

I was so unnerved; It was if something had taken hold of my heart.

"W- what was that sound? We've been hearing that for a while..."

I asked, but Yoishi simply said, "Who knows?" as she continued.

"Who knows...? You heard it, didn't you? It was pretty loud."

I stood bent over, and kept swinging my light around.

"Here."

Yoishi's voice came from ahead.

I looked toward her, and saw that she had stopped in front of a certain room. I drew closer, and saw that her penlight was illuminating a sign reading "Second Resources Room."

"What about this place?"

"From this point on, one person disappeared."

"... Huh?"

I gulped once, then asked.

"In other words, what? That rumor about the number of people decreasing--"

"Was real."

"...You should have said something important like earlier!"

I snapped back at her in exasperation, but, things finally began making sense. In other words, Zippo-san's friend who was hospitalized was the one that disappeared. Of course they'd be stuck in a psychiatric ward if they were stuck here alone in such a creepy place. Even just by standing here, my knees were about to give out-- no. Wait? If that were the case, why would he have been mumbling ‘Yoishi’? Why did she end up stuck with a bad a reputation?

Yoishi quietly shook her head.

"Wrong."

"... Huh?"

"The one who disappeared, was me."

I was horrified at hearing those words.

"I was with them the whole time, yet when we left the hospital, they said I was the only one missing. We checked after we left the hospital, but our recollections matched perfectly up to this room. Yet, when we left the hospital, we remembered things differently. To them, I wasn't there, and to me, I remembered being together with them the whole time. If that was the case -- who were the people I was with?"

I gazed at Yoishi's profile as she happily explained what happened--

I thought: I shouldn't have come after all.

"Why did everyone’s memories diverge? How did it happen? I want to know."

Yoishi drew close to the door with an ecstatic look her face, then turned around once.

"Hey, are you scared?"

She asked, gazing into my eyes.

"How does it feel to be scared?"

And with that, she disappeared into the room.

Left behind alone in the dark corridor, I hesitated.

-- Ahh, I'm scared. Of course I am. Well, I'm going home now, good luck.

How much easier it would be if I could just say that and leave.

However, when a human's level of fear passes a certain threshold, their legs become immobilized. The very act of going out of the flow is likely to provoke something unseen and, conversely, requires tremendous courage. Furthermore, her being high school girl made it especially challenging. If I were to run now, I would never be able to escape from the title of "King of Wussies" for the rest of my life, having left a younger girl alone in a dark hospital.

I had no choice but to wedge myself through the gap in the slightly-ajar door.

It was even darker inside. If there were a density to darkness, it felt like this place had become even more dense. When I shone my light, I could tell it was a space of about twenty-four to twenty-six square meters in size. In the middle was a desk, and various unfamiliar tools were scattered around it. In the corner of the room were several fallen cabinets with shattered glass, and the papers stored inside were also scattered out onto the floor.

I kicked something over and I shined my light on there. It was a crushed beer can. When I looked closely, I saw the remains of

cigarette butts and snack bags scattered around. Probably in large part, the remnants of those "ill-mannered" that Krishna-san despised so much. On weekends, this place probably turns into a place where the bored locals visit to test their courage.

"This must be a pretty popular spot."

I said, and far off in the darkness, an indifferent voice replied, ‘Probably’.

I pointed my light at her and found Yoishi next to a cabinet. She shone her light into the drawers, illuminating the fallen medical records, but eventually picked up something and walked over to me

"We were all looking at this together last time."

Yoishi shone a light on the thing she held out to me: an old university notebook.

"What is that?"

I used my light as I opened it, and realized it was a journal. Letters were written from end to end inside. Inside, there were letters written in a continuous line, most of them in hiragana. Judging by the occasional colored pencil illustrations of cars and people, it appeared to have been written by a child patient. Flicking through, I noticed that the writing stopped about halfway through the notebook. It was dated August 16, 1991. And there, scrawled in large letters on a full page:

"Please fix my sickness."

Those clumsy words stabbed into my heart.

"The name matches, so it's probably this child's."

As I stared dumbfounded at the yellowed notebook, Yoishi handed me a sheet of paper from the side.

It was a medical record. It contained a record of the medical condition and hospitalization of an eight-year-old boy.

And at the end of it, written in a business-like fashion "Deceased."

"He died?"

I muttered reflexively, and Yoishi nodded.

She then pointed her light at the opposing wall and reiterated somewhat happily.

"Yes, he's supposed to be dead."

I was struck speechless when I saw the wall illuminated by the light.

There--

Written In hiragana, in the same handwriting as the notebook:

"I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me."

The writing on the wall was enormous. Each letter was the size of two human heads. And in addition, it was written at a height where even an adult would have trouble reaching.

"Did... this boy write that?"

"Who knows?"

Yoishi said, as she shined her light from one end of the wall to the other.

"But, the problem isn't who wrote it and when."

... Then what's the problem?

I thought, but it seemed like it would become even creepier, so I resolved to ask her only after we'd returned to a brighter area. See? I've grown a bit.

But, that moment.

The lights cut out.

Everything became covered with darkness, and I visibly recoiled.

"H- hey, why'd you turn off your light--"

After I said that, I realized…

... Wait. Yoishi wasn't the only one holding a light. I held a penlight in my hand too -- and I hadn't pressed the switch.

Nevertheless, for it to become pitch dark...

I heard a snapping sound somewhere, again.

It seemed to echo from afar, yet it also seemed to sound close to my ear. It sounded as if the air had split and cracked an invisible wall. And at the same time, I smelled something. A stomach-churning

rotten odor, like a river filled with floating dead fish.

"Hey, Yoishi--"

I called out to my surroundings in a trembling voice, but there was no response.

"... C- Cut that out, hey."

I fumbled with the switch of my mini-light in hand as I shouted, and then--

Snap, crack, snap.

Sharp sounds echoed around me.

This is -- that. The rumored sound of saran wrapping.

And then suddenly, my arm was grabbed.

I was about to shriek, but it made me crouch on the spot.

"Silence."

I kept my mouth shut at Yoishi's sharp whisper.

And then, silence and darkness reigned over the area.

No--

At the edge of that silent world, filled with tension, I could feel something tilting. I could hear a stream of small sounds. Was someone else here? Or was it an animal? A bug? I tried to think that way, but I could clearly sense that small presence had a will. At the very least it wasn't an animal, as it was something that held the same complex and hopeless emotions as that of a human.

And I could tell that it was slowly coming to our room from the far end of the hallway.

I was completely in tears.

And from the bottom of my heart, I acknowledged that I was a wuss.

If I could leave this place with my life, I would never again enter a haunted place. I wouldn't be enticed by Yoishi's bizarre words again. I would finish my letter to my mother, and from here on out, I would take care of my parents, devoting himself only to my studies and part-time work. Right. I'd come to Tokyo to turn around the fortunes of my family lumber business. Yet I was delving into an occult site and was being punished for roaming around in a place like this. This was punishment for not writing the letter to my mother as I said I would. I was wrong. I'll live a proper life from now on. So please. I beg of you. I have no idea what's going on, but please leave this world. Go to that other world.

However -- as if to destroy my impromptu and earnest prayer to the gods.

"Vanish!"

Yoishi's inexplicable shout roared, and the desk beside me made a tremendous noise.

It seemed Yoishi had kicked it hard. Something was shattered by that, and a large sound echoed through what used to be a quiet, abandoned hospital. At the same time, my body began moving again. For some reason, the lights turned back on, and the moment it broke through the darkness -- I saw.

I ended up seeing it.

In the hallway past the slightly ajar door.

A sneaker with blue laces.

And extending from the worn and tattered sneaker -- a thin, pale, rotting, crumbling leg of a child.

"U... uwaa."

I screamed, and so did Yoishi.

"It's not impossible."

She shook off my arm and yelled in a terribly loud voice.

"It's pointless. It's unnecessary."

She kept shouting at something.

How was she making such a loud voice with that thin body of hers? Her loud voice completely cowed me. However, her voice seemed to have strongly agitated something I could not see. Countless things I could not see seemed to slither and move.

Simultaneously -- Yoishi began running toward the hallway. It may have been a challenge toward something I could not comprehend, or perhaps she was just trying to flee.

"W... wait, wait!"

What the heck, I thought as I followed her a moment later.

I stepped on the door she'd completely knocked down and stumbled out into the hallway.

"Hey, wait, Yoishi!"

I pointed my light down the hall, but she didn't wait.

-- You bastard, fine.

I was in the basketball club during high school and was even the point guard. I had confidence in my leg speed.

However -- Yoishi was even faster. There was no trace of her usual plodding pace. Her black hair tossed about as she ran like a young deer, and pulled away from me in the blink of an eye. On the way, she knocked down hospital partitions and withered vegetation, perhaps on purpose, or perhaps because she never saw them. It reminded me more of the ding dong ditches we did in elementary school, making me forget that this was a haunted area. Of course, I regretted it now, but at the time, we were afraid of the furious, bald guy who would chase us, and it was hilarious. My excitement from back then suddenly reawakened. And here it became nothing less than my savior. I blew away the obstacles that crashed into my legs and shoulders, and I kept running. For once, excitement triumphed over fear. I ran through the basement hall, climbed the stairs, and did

a sharp turn at the first floor. I ran desperately, as I chased Yoishi who ran in the distance ahead.

"Hey, Yoishi!"

I kicked open the hospital entrance door and came outside--

However, there was no one there.

I could only hear the sound of insects, and the parking lot was full of weeds.

Under the pale blue moonlight -- I placed my hands on my knees and took deep breaths. My heart felt like it would explode from my first serious run in a while. At any rate, I had never felt so comforted by the moonlight before. As I regained my composure, black socks and black leather shoes appeared before me.

When I looked up, I found Yoishi looking down at me.

"Running away first is a foul, right?"

I complained, gasping for air, but Yoishi grumbled venomously.

"Pathetic."

"... Say again?"

"This place is pathetic."

She stared at the concrete structure floating blackly in the darkness of the night--

And then, she vomited.

She was suddenly throwing up in the parking lot.

Her vomit sparkled under the moonlight.

And as I watched, dumbstruck, I thought it looked kinda pretty.

2

"Krishna-saaan? Are you there--?"

It was about ten hours since I had left that creepy hospital.

I was knocking on the doors of the ‘Ikaigabuchi’ headquarters, the Beatnik Research Club.

"Helloooo?"

I knocked several times, but there was no response.

"That's odd. She's always in at this hour."

I peered into the dark room through the frosted glass attached to the door, and stifled a yawn.

In the end, it was dawn by the time I arrived back at my Musashino apartment from that hospital in Hachiouji.

I had planned to take a voluntary leave of absence today and get as much sleep as possible, but there was a reason I had diligently arrived for first period at university like this.

After walking back to the highway from the hospital, we then walked all the way to Hachiouji train station. The moment we hopped onto first train on the main line, exhaustion finally caught up and we both fell asleep. I regained consciousness just in time for the Mitaka announcement and hurriedly jumped off, but for some reason Yoishi hopped off as well. After that, she wobbled half-asleep, and followed me to my apartment, and in the end collapsed in in the corridor. Of course, I told her. Come on, wake up, go back to your home. I even tried pulling her cheeks, but she just stopped moving, as if her batteries had run out.

Thus, I had no choice but to let her sleep in my apartment, giving her the only futon I had -- and I myself came to university like I'd been kicked out. I went to my not-so-important first-period lecture for "Introduction to Law" to get some sleep, but when I thought about what happened last night, I had trouble doing so. No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't figure out what was going on with that hospital. The mystery of the vanishing member hadn't been solved, and I didn't know what Yoishi called "pathetic" either.

As my mind went in circles over such those things, I lost my chance to sleep. I had no choice but to attended my next class, but I couldn't sleep in "Second Foreign Language" either. And so, without a wink of sleep, I came here when the lunch bell rang.

"Helloooo? Krishna-saaaan?"

I knocked again, but there was no response.

There was no response, but I thought I heard something from inside.

"Seriously?"

Come to think of it, I remember seeing a post on the student bulletin board about there having been a lot of clubroom vandalisms recently.

I was worried and placed my hand on the doorknob, and found that it wasn't locked. I became more and more suspicious, and made up my mind to enter.

I took a deep breath —— and flung the door open.

And when I saw what was inside——

I recoiled.

And completely took a step back.

Inside was a girl with a lit candle attached to her forehead using a headband.

She was dressed in a white robe, in her left hand was a straw doll, and in her right was a wooden mallet.

Long nails were also carefully placed in her pretty lips.

"Hoo haw."

Said the white-robed girl.

Or rather, she probably meant to say "you saw."

However, it didn't sound that way because of the nails in her lips.

"K- Krishna-san, is that you?"

I asked, and the red-framed, white-robed girl -- Krishna-san took the nails away from her mouth, glared at me, and said "You saw." It was a beautiful voice, like the ringing of a bell.

"I knocked."

"Aah, I noticed."

Krishna-san ranted and raved in exasperation.

"But unfortunately, I had nails in my mouth. That means I can't respond. I thought 'Whatever, I'll ignore it', but then the door opened anyway. Thanks to that, my secret experiment is ruined. Who opens the door when there's no response, anyways? Only a thief would open the door, so are you a thief?"

Yes, this petite girl who was so eloquent was ——

Shiina Kurimoto-san, or Krishna, the administrator of the largest occult site in the country.

Incidentally, even though she looks like a middle school girl working part-time as a shrine maiden, she's older than me. She was a twenty-year-old, third-year university student, so you shouldn't be fooled by her loli appearance. Her incredible knowledge and charisma with regards to the occult made her a supremely respected figure on the internet.

"I'm sorry, I just wanted to ask you something." I began to speak, when—

"I have nothing to say to you." She simply replied.

"I told you not to come here anymore, didn't I? I said the same thing to you yesterday, and the day before that too, but you don't have the capacity to learn, do you? Or is this some kind of harassment?"

"Neither."

I bowed down for the time being and let myself into the room.

I looked around the clubroom once again and was dumbfounded to see how it had transformed. Blackout curtains covered the windows, and there were even shimenawa[11] adorned on all sides of the room. Salt had been piled in all four corners, and in the center flickered a single, large candle.

"I'm not sure, but ——"

I looked around at all those things and asked.

"Were you trying to curse someone to death?"

In response, she ripped the candle off her forehead and shouted.

"Fool! Do you think I'm someone who'd mess around with curses? This is an anti-cursing prohibition ritual. It is for returning curses, so to speak. 'Ikaigabuchi' contains a number of dangerous 'Kotodama'[12], depending on how they are used. I'm gathering all of those malicious intents within this doll and burning it —— in other words, I'm grounding them. It's a ritual that can't be seen by anyone else, but because of you --"

"Can't be seen...? What happens when it's seen?"

"The person who sees it gets grounded themselves."

"... Huh?"

Krishna-san silently grabbed my hair and pulled it toward her. She then grabbed what seemed to be a wooden stick with some runes on it from her desk and relentlessly pounded my back with it. It seemed to be an exorcism staff.

"... Ow, ow, it hurts!"

"I'm the one in pain. I had to figure out the date, time and direction of the sun, then gather expensive ritual equipment. Do you know how much time, money and effort went into preparing for this day!?"

Then don't forget to lock your door when you're doing something that important...

I wanted to say that, but I felt blessed, being able to experience Krishna-san's voluptuous breasts up close, even as she whacked me relentlessly on the back with a stick. I thought her breasts were big, but when you're this close to her as she's grabbing your head, you can really feel their size. I wanted to enjoy the soft sensation a bit more, but after twenty-some odd strikes, she abruptly let go of me.

Huh? I raised my head and saw Krishna-san looking at me suspiciously with furrowed brows.

"You've been somewhere suspicious, haven't you?"

"..... What?"

"Strange. There should only be the two of us, but I can sense the presence of several people."

"Wait... please don't say such creepy things."

"Where did you go?"

Krishna-san began sauntering over.

Her big eyes through her red glasses, which had slipped down a little, were right up to my nose.

"Don't tell me you're still seeing that Yoishi girl."

... Oh crap.

Ever since the recent incident, Krishna-san had held a grudge against Yoishi Mitsurugi. Well, it wasn't surprising since she'd given me an answer that was unrelated to ghosts, and Yoishi had gone and made

all of her effort come to naught -- but after that, she kept lecturing me on and on about not getting involved with Yoishi.

I thought about coming up with a story to get around this, but--

This person's intuition was terrifyingly good, and I was bad at lying to begin with.

"I won't get angry, so just tell me."

Krishna-san did an about face and smiled broadly, causing me to immediately loosen my tongue.

I told her how Yoishi and I had gone to the rumor-laden abandoned hospital in Hachiouji last night. About how the rumor that the number of people would change was a fact that Yoishi and the others had experienced. And how I found a notebook in the basement reference room, and saw the same large handwriting on the wall. Of course, I omitted the fact that she was sleeping in my apartment like a corpse, but I explained everything else in complete detail.

"... I see."

After I'd finished confessing, Krishna's smile turned hard.

"So you went to that hospital."

"... Yes."

"And with Yoishi Mitsurugi, of all people."

"... Yes."

"And you saw something and ran back home."

"... Yes."

"You are such—"

Articulating every syllable with feeling, she declared:

"…A hopeless ‘’idiot’’."

I was suddenly grabbed by my collar and slammed into a chair. Krishna-san picked up a pen and paper that was lying on the table, and drew a single line down the middle.

"Alright, listen carefully. This side of the line is where we live. In other words, this side of the Sanzu River. And the other side of the line is the other world, or the other side of the Sanzu River. When you try to learn about the other side, you cross the line. If you peek from this side, the other side will also always be able to see you."

She told me this every time we met, and I hung my head and listened.

"See, they say if you come close to someone with spiritual powers, your spiritual powers grow stronger as well, right? Well, that saying isn't quite right. When you view a paranormal incident, it means you're peering into the other world, and the sense of 'knowing' that comes with that is dangerous. If you know, then you'll always end up getting involved with ghosts, and that is a painful thing. It's like having someone stare at you up close all the time. In contemporary Japan, there is very little scientific research on this, and there are no organizations that will help you. You'll continue to suffer alone, eventually grow tired and choose to die."

Even as chilling thoughts ran through my head, I looked at Krishna-san and said:

"But... if that were to happen, you'd help me, right?"

"You--" Krishna-san blushed bright red and spat. "Idiot! Don't think of me as some superhero on TV. All I can do is acknowledge the existence of the other side, and warn people. If a paranormal disturbance actually occurs, all I can do is request help from those trained in that area, so in reality I can do almost nothing. Anyways, forget about that hospital. Also, you shouldn't see that girl again for the time being. And don't come here anymore."

Krishna-san said, trying to the end the conversation unilaterally. However, I wasn't one to agree and back down that easily.

"Then, tell me one thing. Was Yoishi really the reason for that

incident six months ago? Even though she's the one that disappeared, why was it Zippo-san's acquaintance that was hospitalized?"

And then Krishna-san stared at me with a serious expression.

"... So that's how it is."

She mumbled, then let out a long sigh. She then sat in a chair, leaned back as she stared at the ceiling, scratched her bobbed hair, and finally spoke.

"You're trying to clear Yoishi Mitsurugi’s name."

"Well, um, how should I put it?"

To be honest, that wasn't the only reason. The irrepressible main ingredient of my personality: of wanting to see scary things, was probably also a factor. But I did notice the winds had shifted a bit in my favor, so I decided to keep the conversation going.

"In any case, I can't imagine Yoishi was the reason. But the writing on the wall, the disappearing people, and the word, 'pathetic' Yoishi had said —— I don't understand any of it."

Krishna-san nodded in agreement.

"I don't understand anything about that hospital either."

I was stunned as the occult site administrator, dressed in a shrine maiden outfit, explained:

"That place has too many stories about it. Even though this is a common trend for abandoned hospital-based haunted places, but even so, the rumors surrounding that hospital are too diverse. There are have been sightings of wheelchair-bound ghosts. There are inexplicable sounds. There are ghosts of nurses, ghosts of children. There are some that got lost, only to be hospitalized after their return. And now, people vanish entirely — the more information you get, the more inexplicable it gets... To be honest, I've never seen this pattern before."

Come to think of it--

Yoishi said something similar.

That this situation was rare, that her head hadn't come up with an answer yet.

"I understand lots of rumors crop up around eerie places, but the pattern of haunted places generally ties everything together with a single line. For instance, at the famous Hachiouji castle ruins, there are many sightings of samurai spirits due to the tragic tale of the castle's fall[13], and near Married Couple Rocks, the ghosts of young men and women are often reported due to tragic love stories.[14] In other words, there's always a root behind the rumors. But the abandoned hospital lacks that. Instead, it's like a wild tree, with each branch growing as it pleases —— and the speed of its growth is frightening. I've seen lots of haunted places, but even *I* don't know the truth to that one."

Even this person has things she doesn't know.

It was a somewhat fresh surprise, and I once again felt how profound the world of the occult was, when——

"Nevertheless..."

Krishna-san furrowed her brows.

"Those words on the wall are bad."

"Bad? Why?"

However, Krishna-san didn't reply, instead abruptly asking.

"First of all, what do you think ghosts are?"

"Ghosts?"

I went "hmm", and conveyed the first thing that popped to mind.

"You know, the ones that are often depicted in paintings and so on, having a grudge with their hands hanging down."

"I see, the triangular hood with the burial clothes, is it? Well, that's

pretty typical, but--"

Krishna-san stood up and took out what looked to be an old album from the bookshelf.

"What does this look like?"

A third of the photo on the page she flipped to was a vast expanse of land, and the rest was a clear, blue sky that cut through all the rest. It was probably somewhere in Hokkaidou or somewhere. A concrete-paved road stretched on, and densely packed areas of grass fluttered on either side of it. The rest was white clouds and a blue sky. It looked like a pleasant landscape photo that could be used in a tourist brochure.

"What does it look like? —— Welcome to a summer in Hokkaidou, that sort of thing?"

"Look carefully."

Krishna-san's cute fingers pointed at the blue sky.

A cumulonimbus cloud parallel to the ground, and a cirrocumulus cloud far above—

"Huh?"

... Do cumulonimbus clouds and cirrocumulus clouds appear at the same time?

When I realized that, I felt goosebumps.

...Wrong.

This wasn't a cirrocumulus cloud — it was a face.

Countless, white, hollow faces floated in the sky.

"... Eeeep!"

Krishna-san gave me a slight smile as I jumped back and as she slammed the album shut.

"According to the person who is my teacher, it is said that people who die with lingering regrets in this world stay behind in some form or another. Sometimes with just an arm, and sometimes with just an eye. In other words, it's rare for them to retain their human form. Moreover, after some time, they end up forgetting what it was they regretted in the first place. In short, they become just hollow, floating matter — however, this hollow, floating matter can combine."

"Combine... like, together?"

"Yes. Be it dogs, cats or humans, ghosts that just float aimlessly combine. And they expand without end. My teacher said the largest he'd seen was the size of Mount Fuji. A giant mass covered with painful expressions throughout was just wandering above the ocean."

I was horrified at the thought of that scene.

A giant mass formed only with countless dog, cat, and human heads. Countless negative emotions stretched out across the sky. Then the sky I was always casually looking up at — was full of such things floating around? Could it be that the clouds I'd been looking up at weren't even clouds at all?

"Who knows. Whatever the case may be, that floating matter slowly disappears over time. There are those who've seen ghosts of warriors, but I've never heard of sightings of Jomon ghosts[15]. Apparently, there are reasons for that, but it takes a significant amount of time, like hundreds of years, for them to disappear. In other words, there are still countless, enormous globs of ghosts floating around this world — and here's the problem: when they get caught in some kind of spiritual magnetic field, they stop there. For instance, enormous sacred grounds areas, or murder scenes with tremendous amounts of hate — they have a tendency to stay at those places. So, in other words, that's—"

Ahh, I finally understood.

In other words, that's what's called a haunted place.

The presence of countless people I felt yesterday in that abandoned hospital. Countless stares.

Recalling those presences, which still lingered on my skin, I once again felt a chill crawl down my spine.

"And, the problem goes back to the words you saw on the wall."

Krishna-san pushed her glasses up and continued.

"I don't know what kind of idiot made their prank, but it continued the words from the notebook, 'Please fix my sickness' with 'I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me.' It became context. In short, it created meaning."

I swallowed, and Krishna-san asked.

"What happens when you give meaning to a place where a collection of ghosts floating aimlessly, gather?"

I felt something cold down my spine.

"They desperately seek meaning. They must seek meaning because they’re existence is so weak."

I suddenly imagined a mass of floating thoughts turning to look towards me at the same time. That collection of countless faces was probably imagined them from the photo I'd just seen — and suddenly, those blank stares overlapped with Yoishi's glass bead-like gaze.

"You wanted to clear her name, I can respect the intent behind the action."

Krishna-san, muttered with a somewhat distant stare.

"But there are some things people shouldn't see."

I felt my heart freeze.

"In reality, this shore and that shore are designed to be separate. That girl Yoishi, easily crosses the boundary. And that is an extremely dangerous thing. Her words and deeds include things that people must not know. No — something that people inherently know, but because they have chosen to forget, they remain people. Yet her

words contain them."

Her words—

I felt like I had solved the mystery of why Yoishi's words bewildered me so.

I felt that even if Krishna-san said the same thing, I would only be excited, but when she said them, it felt like the something would shift out of place. As if the walls of common sense I'd believed in were crumbling — I'd feel uneasy, as if I didn't know where I was standing. That's what I experienced last time, and this time as well.

"Unfortunately, though, it's very difficult to save children like that."

Krishna-san looked somewhat lonely—

And I thought.

She must have tried saving people like that with all her strength in the past. But she was unable to in the end. Maybe Yoishi resembled someone in her past, and even if I were wrong--

I'd lost the will to keep asking questions.

I somewhat understood what my own limits were. My mental strength, my assertiveness, my knowledge about ghosts, they were nothing compared to the baby-faced administrator in front of me. Yoishi too, would continue jumping into the paranormal even if I were to try stopping her. And I, a stranger, can't keep following her every time.

To clear Yoishi's name—

Was something way beyond my powers, I realized.

"... Thank you very much, for everything."

As I stood up weakly, hoisting my bag over my shoulder, Krishna-san handed me a white bag.

"This is coarse salt purified by Susanoo no Mikoto from the Imamiya

temple. Place this by the entrance to your room for a week. If something odd happens, let me know immediately."

"Yes," I answered, as I opened the door.

"Oh, yes."

Krishna called me from behind.

"You didn't take anything out from that hospital, did you?"

I laughed as I stepped out into the hallway.

"I'm not that reckless." I said, and closed the door.

I went out into the hallway, and proceeded down the dark concrete path — as I clutched my head in my hands.

I wanted to tell her everything, but I was unable to, due to my stupidity.

I opened my bag and took out a notebook.

It was the notebook with ‘Please fix my sickness’ written in it.

Overlay

3

When I went back to my apartment, Yoishi was no longer there.

She'd noticed the key I'd placed on the desk, as she'd locked it and placed the key in the post.

When I entered the foyer, I heaped the coarse salt I'd received from Krishna-san at the edge of the door, and finally took a deep breath. I told myself that I would go see Krishna-san again tomorrow and talk to her about having taken the notebook.

When I went to the living room, I found that my futon had been properly folded. She may be well-raised after all, I thought, and at the same time, I was worried if she would be alright after having stayed out all night.

Where did she live, anyways? What high school year was she? Was she a part of any clubs? What subjects was she good at? What were her hobbies? Did she have any pets? What were her favorite books?

I knew nothing about Yoishi.

I didn't know where she lived, her phone number, or her email address.

If I wanted to contact her from here, the only way to do that would be to make a post on the "Ikaigabuchi" forum. For such a tenuous relationship, the only thing that lay between us was the great question of life and death, between the world on this side, and the world beyond. It was like suddenly dating in a castle keep without

even filling the outer moat.

"Well, I'm probably thinking of dumb examples because I'm tired..."

I’m just gonna sleep.

At any rate, my body felt as heavy as lead.

It was still just a bit past seven, but I changed out of the clothes I had been wearing since yesterday, and washed my face. After brushing my teeth and feeling refreshed, I laid out the futon and laid down, but immediately jumped back up. No, it wasn't that I'd been mesmerized by the lingering flowery scent of a high school girl or anything.

—— The pillow reeked.

An extremely sour scent was soaked into the pillow. That was terrible considering I was tired and just wanted to sleep. That bastard, next time I see her, I'm going to force her to take a bath. I had no choice but to roll up the cushion and use it as a pillow, and I lay back down again. But the strong odor was again driving my sleepiness far away.

Since sleep was out of the question, I remained lying down and looked up the Hachiouji abandoned hospital on my mobile phone. I had looked it up on my computer before, but hadn't checked using my phone. But when I saw the search results, I was astonished. Even on a cell-phone-specific search site, or perhaps because it was a cell-phone-specific site, I got an absurd number of hits.

"That place is actually pretty famous."

I began opening the pages on the search result from the top.

For the most part, they were community forums, or some occult sites specializing in the local area. But I found a single keyword common in them all.

The phrase that it was "a hospital that grants wishes."

I'd heard that phrase somewhere, I thought, and realized it was something I’d been brandishing myself up until a while ago. Fool,

there are no shortcuts for granting wishes. I mumbled the exact same words Krishna-san had told me, and I looked at the posts on the site with a smirk in my face. I jokingly felt like I was looking at a group of cute juniors—

"My height grew!" "I got a girlfriend!" "My hernia got better" "I got a job" "I won a lottery!"

Every forum was full of those types of posts.

"Hey, hey, are you serious?"

I suddenly got up and kept reading.

It seemed those words written on the notebook and the wall — "Please fix my sickness" "I'll do whatever you ask if you fix me" had caused such rumors to spread. There was even a wiki with information, so I took a look.

```
* There's a resources room in the basement of the abando
* There's writing on the wall saying "I'll do whatever y
* Say "〇〇〇〇 will fix you" three times at the wall, usi
* Say your wish, "In return, give me △△".
* Afterwards, return something in the hospital back to i
* Say to the wall again, "〇〇〇〇 fixed it".
* Your wish gets granted.
```

…Was apparently how it was summarized.

"How absurd." I groaned.

And as I read other related sites, I slowly became depressed.

I found a picture of someone screwing around inside that hospital. Someone who burned medical records and had bonfires. Someone peeing next to that, and another making a peace sign with a beer can.

"I see. No wonder Krishna-san was enraged."

She always said:

— The moral deterioration of the Japanese people has been severe in

recent years.

Since ancient times, the Japanese have been a noteworthy people in their reverence for invisible beings. This may be tied to the belief in eight million gods, and there are indeed many gods in Japan. As the saying goes, "When you die, you become a Buddha", no matter how much conflict you may have had during your life, you must be revered no differently than a god after death. From the point of view of a contemporary mind, it may seem that we just can't decide who to worship, hence we erratically believe in just about anything, but I still think that the Japanese disposition to fear and revere the invisible is not a bad thing. Well, Maybe it's because we still believe in a vague mountain god in my hometown, and so respecting other such entities is something I take for granted.

My gaze fell on the bag I had left next to the living room door.

I crawled closer and took out the notebook. It was the journal filled to the brim with the clean writing of the eight-year-old who had departed from this world. I opened the yellowed, worn pages, and read through it from the beginning.

The boy was apparently admitted to the hospital initially for a check-up. He was looking forward to going back home as soon as possible. However, as the hospital stay dragged on and the number of tests increased, the boy's letters seemed to have become smaller and less cheerful. After that, he began writing mostly about what he'd do if he could leave hospital. He wanted to ride a bike. Play soccer with friends. Go out with his family. Go fishing for crayfish. Play video games. Run as hard as he could. He wanted to be able to do things that children normally do. Mid-way through the middle of the notebook, he began just wanting to go home. He wrote that the examinations were painful. He wrote often about suffering from seizures. My breath caught in my throat at reading the heavy sentiments that could only be expressed by one who had suffered.

And that’s when it finally dawned on me.

Why I'd clutched at the notebook in the darkness.

And why I brought the notebook out and never let it leave my side.

I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand the thought of this boy, who died so young, to be left alone in that dark room.

He was —— me.

I had infantile asthma when I was child.

It went away as I grew up, but at the time, the mere hint of an attack was enough to send me into a panic. It felt like air was being sucked away from my surroundings, that I'd been plunged into a bottomless, deep ocean alone, as I was beset by a severe inability to breathe. That sense of blinding despair — it still remained there, soaked into my body. When I was sleeping and felt the signs of an attack, I'd run crying to my parents. And at that time, I found one thing more comforting than any doctor or medicine — the palm of my mother's hand. As she stroked my back with her warm palms, a strange feeling of security spread through my chest and before I knew it, the attacks had stopped.

I looked down at the last page of the notebook.

"Please fix my sickness."

I had a mother, but did this child have anyone to act as a bulwark against his suffering?

Did he have a safe place to run to?

That was probably the reason why I brought this notebook with me.

Suffering until death and continuing to become a plaything in a haunted spot after death, I couldn't forgive that.

However, I let out one long breath.

Nevertheless, I still didn't know what to do with this notebook. If I were to take care of it to the end, it would probably be best to wipe away the writing om that wall, but I didn't have the courage to go back there again.

"Sheesh... I'm such a worthless wuss."

I scratched my head, when--

Suddenly, my cell phone vibrated.

I jumped a bit and answered without checking who the caller was.

《Yo! Little Nagi!"》

I stiffened at the bright, carefree voice echoing from the receiver.

《It's me, it's me. How ya doin'?》

"H... Hi, sis."

—— Yes.

It was Akira Yamada, genetically my bigger sister.

《Whaddaya mean, 'hi, sis'? I toldja to lemme know when you're coming home for summer vacation.》

Incidentally, my big sis was a bit of a gangster back in the day, so she still talked like that.

"Ahh, sorry, um, about going home. Umm, Obon is the best time, right? Around the end of July, then."

《Hey!》

I shuddered as a low, cool air drifted in from the other end of the phone.

《Tell me an exact date. Unlike you, I work, I need ta ask for paid leave. Ya hear?》

Akira, four years older than me, graduated with a two-year degree at a junior college near our home in Shizuoka, and worked at a company in our hometown. I'd never won against her in a verbal spat, and I don't think I could win against her in a physical brawl either. On top of that, I'd also become indebted to her because of the of the incident the other day. Basically, my current position was the worst and weakest in my eighteen years of life.

《Mum and dad are waiting for their useless son, and you're all grown up now. It’s time you started payin’ your elders some respect.》

"... I know."

《Hmm? What's with that crappy answer?》

"I'm sorry. I understand."

《So, when? Around the end of July?》

"Umm. They should post the mid-year exam dates next week, so I'll call you immediately after that."

《Mm. Next week it is. If y'don't call me by next weekend I'ma beat you.》

"Yes."

《Ahh, one more thing.》

"Yes?"

《The bonfire this year, we're takin' care'a it. Get home before Bon festival. 》

With a clang, she hung up. I stared at the call time displayed on the cell phone LCD reading 1 minute 37 seconds, and breathed a deep sigh.

My sister Akira, who changed the atmosphere of the room in a mere 1 minute 37 seconds — terrifying.

After that, I looked up at the ceiling once more.

—— I had my hands full. I was carelessly sticking my hands into lots of things and then leaving them be once I'd gotten in over my head. I tried living at a cheap place and ran away, becoming indebted to my sister in the process, and it wasn't even like I was paying much attention in school, nor was I intending to spend my life studying the occult like Krishna-san. On top of all that, I didn't even know what to

do with a notebook I'd taken from a haunted place.

Suddenly, I thought of Yoishi's gloomy, white face.

She was incredibly beautiful, but her emotionless, inorganic face was like that of a doll.

There was no way I could handle her.

I rolled over and fell asleep at some point.

I was in a white, foggy world.

There, Yoishi was smiling radiantly, an expression I'd never seen before.

— Hey, so you can smile, after all.

I called out to her, but she didn't seem to hear. Not noticing me, she happily frolicked about. She was playing about with something that was slithering below her. I thought it might have been a dog or something, but when I looked toward her feet, I was aghast. There was a snake.

No — it wasn't a snake; It was a creature I had never seen before with an unusually long torso. At the end of the torso was a face. And, it too, was Yoishi. A face even gloomier than Yoishi's usual gloomy, darkened face was stuck there. And the human Yoishi kept kicking it incessantly, laughing to her heart's content. 'Hey. stop it', I called out, and human Yoishi turned towards me, then the snake Yoishi also looked at me. And both of them asked at once: Why? Why, you ask? — It shouldn't feel good kicking a person. I said, but the human Yoishi just laughed. The snake Yoishi went silent, as if to say, 'Pathetic'. It's alright, this child is a bad child. So said human Yoishi as she resumed kicking. It's alright, I'm bad. The snake Yoishi said and continued to suffer while being kicked. I kept shouting at them to

stop, stop. But the more I shouted, the more the two of them got lost in kicking and being kicked.

Eventually, snake Yoishi's stomach was kicked open, and reddish-black blood began seeping out into the area—

I opened my eyes.

...What sort of dream was I having?

The room's light remained on. I absentmindedly checked the time on my mobile phone and found that it was past one 1 AM. I'd been sleeping for just about six hours. My throat felt thirsty, so I stood up and was about to get some water from the kitchen.

I heard a bizarre sound from the apartment hall. It sounded like something being dragged along. Was it my neighbor? I thought of leaving it be, but eventually that something went thud and bumped into something. And then silence.

"...Now what?"

I fearfully crept to the door, looked through the peeping hole, and was shocked.

There was a revenant there.

No——

Yoishi Mitsurugi, who could only be described as a revenant, stood stock still in her school uniform.

"H... hey, what're you doing?"

I asked through the door, but she didn't respond.

I had no choice but to unlock the door, and open the door, and there was Yoishi wobbling in place.

"I'm asking what you're doing there."

When I said that again, Yoishi seemed to have finally recognized me.

Her glass bead-like eyes turned to me, and she mumbled, "Oh, you."

"W-what do you mean 'oh, you.' Don't act like you've coincidentally met me when you're standing in front of my house. How long have you been th-"

-ere, I was about to finish, and then I realized.

Yoishi was drenched from head to toe. I was a little shocked to see that her drenched blouse had become transparent and I could see her undergarments, but I could see brown water dripping from her skirt.

And moreover— it was putrid. It was the most putrid she'd ever been.

"Were you cleaning the gutter or something?"

I asked, pinching my nose.

"I've never had a part-time job like that."

She answered with a serious look. Good god, it was impossible to have a conversation with her. In any case, making a racket in the hallway this late at night would bother my neighbors, so I let her in. And when I closed the door, her odor was even more painful. I immediately decided what I was going to do right then. I could do nothing about the contamination of the hallway. But beyond that, I decided to stop it at all costs. I decided to eliminate the rotting odor before it reached the living room.

‘Come on’, I grabbed Yoishi by the collar, and dragged her into the unit bath. On the way, I was disgusted to see some brown droplets spilling in the corridor from her hair and the edges of her clothes.

"I'll find a jersey or something, but for now you need to take a bath."

I then shoved her in and shut the door.

I heard "I hate baths" from inside, but:

"I don't care, get in. Wash your body at least three times."

I yelled back angrily, and then I started going through the cardboard

boxes I'd left unopened since moving in.

Even if it was the cusp of summer, she'd still catch a cold like that. And the biggest problem was this sewer stench. I'd just moved into an apartment with new wallpaper that smelled nice, so this was too much. From the bottom of a cardboard box, I found a pair of jersey clothes that had been sent from home, and went back to the bathroom. But I knew the moment I went closer. The sharp odor wafted in the air, and the bath door was open.

"I said wash—"

"I found out what that abandoned hospital is."

Said Yoishi, whose tired eyes twinkling slightly.

○

— Ah, why?

I'd forced Yoishi to sit in front of the unit bathroom sink, and was washing her hair with a shower. I'd been spraying her with hot water for some time, but the brown water kept leaking out like a sewage drain.

It seemed Yoishi had gone back to that hospital alone. She went there just after waking up around noon, but it was six o' clock by the time she'd left the hospital after investigating various things, and everything was pitch black by then. Her penlight battery had died, and after wandering the mountain at night, she fell into the river.

"Use a taxi or something."

I said, and she fell silent.

"... Don't tell me, they turned you down?"

"....."

... Well, it's no surprise given how drenched she was.

In all likelihood, she walked all the way to the train station like this, and ignored all the shocked looks as she came here. I sighed, imagining Yoishi sitting alone on the train, soaking wet, with her immediate vicinity vacated.

"Listen, Yoishi."

I ran hot water through her hair and gave her advice as someone older than her.

"Appearances are important in this world. People say that looks don't matter, but making a good first impression is quite important. That's how you get off to a good start. That's why you should at least take a bath every day. And if you're going to someone's house, go at a normal hour. You probably don't care what time it is, so I'll tell you, it's half past one. That's when most people are asleep."

But it was as if Yoishi wasn't listening to a word I'd said.

She'd shut her long eyelashes together and looked like she was comfortable staring somewhere else.

This was starting to become silly, but the brown water had finally returned to being clear, so I put shampoo all over her head and forcefully rubbed. It lathered up beautifully and the unit bath was immediately filled with the scent of shampoo.

"So what'd you find out about that hospital?"

When I asked that, Yoishi answered, eyes still shut.

"I have nothing to do with the incident that happened there."

"You mean — about Zippo-san's friend?"

Yoishi nodded slightly.

"Then, what about you disappearing?"

"I don't want to talk about that."

... Don't want to talk about that?

Then why'd you come here?

I thought, as I kept washing her hair.

"There's a ghost online."

She said, words that made no sense.

"Have you read self-responsibility horror stories?"

"You mean the ones that say 'It's your own responsibility if you read past this'?"

Those were famous online, horror stories that were said to curse you just by reading them. There were several patterns, like becoming possessed by knowing the story, or being possessed if you understood the meaning, those types. But to be honest I didn't really believe in them.

"Those are make-believe, right?"

I said, but she began explaining, "Not all of them."

"Ghosts are very sensitive to things that notice them."

The way she said it gave me goosebumps.

"If you talk about ghosts, ghosts gather. If they know you can see them, they come closer. All of those stories conform to this nature of ghosts. I told you before that the really interesting stories always have some sense of discomfort in them — but that's why. If you describe the facts about the ghost accurately, it becomes a strange sentence. Because there is a truth about the other side that is difficult for humans to comprehend. That's why when a story has some incompleteness, it's, in a way, actually complete."

As ever, she was terribly verbose when it came to talking about ghosts.

"I don't get it, but —"

I asked anyways.

"What do self-responsibility type ghost stories have to do with that abandoned hospital?"

“They’re identical in that you become possessed once you know the truth.”

At those words, my goosebumps crept down my neck to the bottom of my feet.

In other words, she wanted to say that I shouldn't ask anymore. Krishna-san always said, if you peer into the other side, they would also see you. They were essentially saying the same thing, but it is still differently more intimidating when she says it.

“Anyways…"Yoishi added. "The person who became hospitalized had nothing to do with me. I'm fine with just figuring that out."

She closed her eyes again and went silent.

After that, she wouldn't answer me anymore.

... So to summarize.

Apparently, she, in her own way, felt responsible for last year's incident. That fact that someone who she'd gone with to a haunted place ended up hospitalized. And that she knew the place was dangerous. Even though she couldn't stop it, she wanted to know the answer, and had visited the hospital three times and learned enough to be convinced in her own way.

I still had no idea what that hospital was, but, for better or for worse, I was busy. I was enjoying washing Yoishi's hair as the shampoo bubbled like a summer cumulonimbus cloud.

No shame in admitting it, I enjoyed cleaning. I get an irresistible pleasure out of making dirty things clean. People around me said I was weird, but I even loved cleaning ventilation fans, which are considered tough to clean. When I scrubbed that stuck-on grease with an unwanted toothbrush or something and the original metal became visible, I was filled with an irrepressible excitement. Look, this thing

is actually this pretty, that sort of feeling. I don't know if it's because of this, but I liked the last scene of the ugly duckling: when the duckling is actually a swan, I like that sort of thing. European folktales, about bear hide, and such. In that sense, Yoishi's dirty, dirty head was a fun challenge to me.

In the end, I ended up shampooing her hair three times. Afterwards, I rinsed it too, and almost felt regretful that my house had no treatment, because Yoishi's hair had become so polished and smooth. I placed a tower on her head and wiped.

"Look at that. If you clean it properly, it becomes this pretty."

I wiped the fogged mirror in front of us with the towel to show Yoishi her face.

As our eyes met in the mirror, my heart skipped a beat.

Yoishi, with her clean, wet hair, was incredibly beautiful. Her glossy skin and dark, thin, straight eyebrows were exquisite, and the large dark eyes beneath them were as beautiful as the clear night sky. She was probably just dazed, but her half-opened lips had a seductive curve.

She was just like that — a waste of treasure.

However, instead of saying "thank you," Yoishi said in a tone devoid of emotion.

"You're useful."

I was about to say "Are you serious?"

Suddenly, something strange assailed my nostrils. Ahh, I looked at her uniform. Come to think of it, she was still wearing her muddy uniform. I wanted to take it off and clean her all over, but that was way beyond what I could do.

"You do the rest. You can use the soap there."

I stood, but the strange odor grew stronger. It was like the smell of rotting fish I used to smell from the factory near the river when I was

a child. Odd. The ventilation fan is on in the unit bathroom, and the smell of shampoo should have been lingering in the air until now, at least after washing her hair ——

And then Yoishi suddenly said.

"Did you, by any chance, take something from the hospital?"

"... Huh?"

At the same time, she stood up, and tried to go somewhere —

Before she vomited.

She vomited again.

The toilet bowl was right next to her, but she vomited the sparkling intestinal liquid right onto the floor.

"Hey, you, Yoishi!"

I was about to shout at her, when I got a jolt.

I saw the reflection in the mirror, which almost fogged up again with steam, on the other side of the unit bath—

In the hallway, was a blue-laced sneaker.

The legs were pale and discolored, worn and battered like a drowned body.

Unlike me, frozen in place, Yoishi suddenly shouted.

"Get out!"

Or rather than a shout, it was like a threatening howl, and I jumped up.

Still dripping saliva from her mouth, Yoishi had turned around to the other side of the mirror — to the hallway.

"H-hey, Yoishi."

I fearfully looked in the direction Yoishi looked, but there was no one there anymore.

Only the droplets from Yoishi remained in the hallway.

"Ah, hey, wait."

But before I could stop her, Yoishi crawled out into the hallway.

Drops of hair and river water dripped from her clothes. She slithered into the living room on her own, scattering them everywhere. She splendidly barged onto my new carpet and continued. And without any hesitation, she went to the bag I'd tossed aside, and started rummaging through it.

"This."

She took that notebook out of the bag and looked at me.

"So you had it then."

I didn't know how to explain it, so I just kept quiet. and Yoishi said at me:

"This is how I got here."

4

"Hey, where do I go from here?"

I was frantically pedaling the bicycle, and yelled out the question.

"Somewhere no one goes to."

Yoishi replied as she sat on the rear seat of the mama-cycle.

She held the notebook in her hand, which was wrapped in newspaper.

"So, about why you came straight to my house from the hospital,"

"Yes — I was following this."

Soon afterwards, Yoishi quickly ran down the hall to the kitchen, and rubbed the coarse shrine salt that had been left on the coffee table over her hands. She sprinkled it on her freshly washed head and on her still-wet clothes. And then, with astonishing speed, she said, "I'm borrowing this," and covered the notebook with the newspaper that had been left there. However, she had a look of ecstasy. She was sealing something terrible, yet her joyous look made me realize how dangerous things had become.

"So that notebook is really dangerous?"

"This is the cause of everything."

"Cause? But it’s just a journal."

"Yes — but, everyone put a meaning to it."

"Put a meaning—?"

And then, I remembered Krishna-san had said something similar.

"Hey, shouldn't we contact Krishna-san?"

But Yoishi flatly rejected that.

"This notebook shouldn't be seen by any more people."

Those words gave me goosebumps, and Yoishi suddenly pointed ahead.

"Turn that corner."

"What?"

"There's a place I want to stop by."

I followed her order and turned into a narrow path off the main road.

There was a small shopping street. They were all closed, of course, since it was nighttime, but it was so quiet that I wondered if it was even open during the day. The streetlights were sparse and their light was unreliable. I'd been trying to stick to roads with lots of people, but why were we going here?

"Hey, where are we headed?"

"There should be a shrine up ahead."

"You want to seal it there?"

"No."

She said naturally.

"I want to get a shimenawa[16] there."

—Shimenawa? Get one?

But just as Yoishi said, a torii gate came soon came into view at the bottom of the shopping street.

The lights of the main shrine are lit at the end of a narrow approach

between dimly lit trees.

I slid the bicycle into the narrow parking area, and Yoishi jumped off. She ran under the arch to a big gingko[17] tree beside the main building. I parked the bicycle, ran to her, and looked around, flustered.

"Are you sure you should do that?"

"Do you want to be cursed or anger a god? Choose."

... I didn't want either.

However, Yoishi must have realized that pulling on the shimenawa would yield no results, as she ran off again. She went into a shack next to the shrine office, and came out with a sickle in her hand. And before I could stop her, she had cut through the thick old shimenawa with great skill. During all this, I prayed toward the main building. Sorry, sorry, she's a denpa. She's probably not a bad person, but she's a denpa.

"There's no such thing as a god, so don't worry."

She said, holding the newspaper wrapped around the notebook in her left hand, and the shimenawa in her right.

"Then why do you need shimenawa?"

"Things that people have prayed to for a long time contain an equal amount of power."

It wasn't the first time I didn't understand what she was talking about.

In any case, I frantically followed Yoishi, who ran back to the bicycle.

When we were both seated, I took off, as if escaping.

I sped up, pointing the bicycle back down the old shopping street towards the main road, and planned to return back the road I came in at full speed.

However—

I had a strange feeling. There was something subtly different from the shopping street earlier — right, as if the number of shops had increased. The shops all still had their shutters closed, but I felt that the shop signs, which used to be one in every few houses, seemed to be attached to almost every house. No, that wasn't all. The rooms behind the windows were faintly bright. There were signs that people were awake. There was a buzz of activity, as if the shops were about to open at any moment.

"Quickly."

Yoishi whispered in my ear.

I didn't need her to tell me: I was pedaling at full force.

Something was wrong. Strange things were happening around me — no, were about to happen.

I could sense people in the narrow alleys between houses.

I could sense them looking at me, but I could no longer look back. I could feel the shutters of the stores beginning to open as I was passing by. I felt like the area behind me suddenly brightened, but I did my best to ignore it. I just kept pedaling and pedaling.

— Give it back.

Suddenly, I felt like I heard that voice. I could feel countless hands closing in behind us. Sorry, sorry, sorry, I repeated in my heart as I endured. My whole body was already covered in sweat. I sped the bicycle toward the end of the seemingly endless shopping street, and dashed out onto the main street.

That moment.

Blinding light filled my retinas. I could hear a blaring horn sound. It was a truck. It was coming at us from the side, about to crash into us head on.

"U... wawawah."

I desperately turned. But it wasn't enough. I couldn't get out of the way.

We were going to be run over — right as I thought that, my cheap mama-cycle performed a feat of mobility I never thought possible. It felt as if time stopped, and when I looked back Yoishi was hanging on for dear life. Her long hair flowed, and her center of gravity had gone so low that her face almost scraped against the ground.

"Pedal!"

That word snapped me back to reality, and I pedaled with all my might.

The tyres, which had been slipping all over the road on both wheels, gripped the road at that moment. The balance of the vehicle was suddenly restored.

"NUOOOOOOOH!"

It was just by a hair.

The truck honked again and grazed us as it passed by.

The air pressure of the truck passing by struck us, but we kept our balance. For a while, I couldn't think about anything, and Yoishi was silent.

From ancestors to whatever—

I gave my thanks to every god I could think of.

○

When we entered through the torn wire fence, we found ourselves on a wetland overgrown with weeds.

The surrounding area was completely dark. Whenever the moon hid behind a cloud, we couldn't even see each other’s faces anymore.

The ground was soft, and the area was filled with the displeasing odor of sludge. Only the sound of insects could be heard from there.

We were north of Musashino, at a disused reservoir.

I looked around, speechless, to see Yoishi had a penlight between her lips and was diligently tying random stones around the notebook with the shimenawa she'd just pilfered.

"What're you doing?"

"Sinking it."

She muttered, as if it were something obvious.

I looked at the darkest part of the darkness in front of me once more — at the reservoir.

The pond, which was 30 metres square, stood quietly in the darkness.

"Say." As the insects kept buzzing, I asked. "Do we really have to do that?"

Yoishi's white face, illuminated by the light, looked my way.

"He has nothing to do with this, right? He just got sick and died. Why does he have to be sunk in such a lonely place?"

"That’s mere sentimentality."

"Have you read this notebook? All he wanted was a healthy body. And—"

My eyes had gotten used to the darkness, and a sludgy reservoir full of floating algae was spread out before me.

"And he has to be sunk in a lonely place like this?"

"Those that fall into darkness, must be treated as those that belong to the darkness."

"... What?"

"All criminals have circumstances that caused them to stain their hands with crime. They may have been abused by their parents. They may have been raised in a socially disadvantaged environment. It

could be the result of exposure to heart-breaking malice. And yet, once you've fallen to the darkness, there's no coming back."

Yoishi never stopped, and I just watched.

What to do. What should I do? Yoishi indifferently continued her work. There was no hesitation in her actions. But her slender back stole my eyes away again. To me, it looked to me like she was tying herself. Like she was trying to eliminate her dirtied self. Like that dream—

I recalled the scene of human Yoishi relentlessly kicking snake Yoishi.

"Stop."

I found myself holding Yoishi's hand.

"Let’s think of something else."

"There is nothing else."

"Like a temple, or an exorcist."

"It's not something they can deal with."

For some reason, her usual judgmental tone of voice was somehow intolerable on this occasion.

"How can you say that?"

I looked at her white face.

"You don't know until you've tried."

"I do know."

Turning her jet-black eyes, which were darker than the darkness around her, to me, Yoishi spoke:

"Once a person knows the depth of the darkness, they will end up possessed by those depths."

I became speechless.

I thought of the author who disappeared into the dam on a rainy night. I thought that was just romanticism that existed in stories. I thought it was just high school delusions. However, the words that she uttered now had a weight behind them that could not be easily denied.

But—

But, I shook my head.

I wanted to ask, "Is it really okay to let someone be possessed, and be swallowed up?"

What does it matter if you know what the darkness is.? What's the point of sinking to the bottom of the dam? People die eventually. You can leave the joy of darkness for that occasion. I love mysterious things too. When I see something that can't happen, I'm thrilled by the profoundness of the world. But just like my father prays to the mountain god when he cuts trees from the mountain, it was like paying respect to the existence that we can't see, to something that far surpasses human strength — to nature, you might say -- it's the same as paying homage to it.

I learned that from mother. When I was a kid, I trembled in fear of the seizures that I couldn't predict. One morning, I was awakened at sunrise, and was taken to Mount Eboshi. I remember entering the mountain in the pitch dark, and I clung to mother's hand, rubbing my sleepy eyes as we climbed. The mountain at night was a demonic place where you couldn't see your feet and the sounds of strange animals rang out from everywhere. I climbed, terrified, with my eyes mostly shut, clinging to my mother's hand as my only source of dependability. I didn't know why mother took me out into the mountain at night. But when we arrived at the summit, when mother pointed her finger at the rising sun, I let out a silent scream. The darkness was split asunder, and the sight of the sunrise drenching everything in overpowering light made me shudder with awe. I was shown, with a persuasive power that outweighed a thousand words, that we too are simply being kept alive by the biological miracles that make up this world.

As I thought such random things—

"You should come to Fujieda one day." I ended up saying.

"I'll show you the early morning view from Mount Eboshi there. And if you can still spout that line, then try spouting it."

Yoishi's large eyes widened, as if she was a little surprised.

— Ahh.

I'm stupid. I'm really stupid.

I thought, but I couldn't take back my words.

I had no choice but to stick out my chest.

"That's how it is."

"What you say lacks any logic whatsoever."

She let out a small sigh, and I couldn't fault her for it.

"Anyways, I'm not sinking him there."

I snatched the notebook from Yoishi, and held it close to my chest, as if to embrace it.

Yoishi silently looked at me for a bit, and then.

"Do as you wish."

Eventually, she spoke those cold words, turned her back to me, and left.

○

I know.

I know that I'm an idiot and a wuss beyond saving, I know that well.

Basically, that was it. As you'd expect, I ignored Yoishi's warning and

brought the notebook back home, and within a week, strange things started happening around me one after another.

For example, one rainy morning.

On the bus ride to university, I saw it.

I was holding on to the strap in a daze, and there he was, a little further away.

A man wearing a kamishimo[18], like you'd see in a historical drama. The color was faded, and he stood there elegantly. Despite his conspicuous attire of an indigo dyed kimono and white hakama, no one so much as glanced at him. Of course, cosplay was all the rage these days, so I looked away. However, when the bus arrived at a stop and I looked in that direction again, he was gone. I thought he had merely gotten off. Then I looked outside, and almost fainted. For some reason, he was standing on top of a building next to the main street. He was aloof and walking on the fence on the roof of the building.

And then, during a university lecture:

I suddenly heard the sound of a whistle. It was somewhat wistful and lonely, being carried softly by the wind. I was listening to it, thinking how elegant it was, when I suddenly realized that it wasn't coming from outside. It was emanating from the classroom, or more specifically, from beside me. I hurriedly glanced around, but, of course, no one was playing a flute. I mean, if you were blowing a flute during a lecture, you were bound to get scolded by the professor. I quickly suppressed my pounding heart and breathed deeply a few times. However, I still heard the flute. The melody wasn't long enough to follow, but it also wasn't short enough to ignore. And yet, the tune was distinctive and lingered in my head. I became scared and covered my ears. That moment, I felt goosebumps, as if water was splashed on my back. I could still hear it. I could hear it even though I was covering my ears. When I realized I was hearing it from inside my head, I covered my mouth to stop myself from screaming, and leaped out of the classroom.

During lunchtime, it happened again when I was playing basketball

with some guys in the gymnasium.

When I'd cut off the ball and was dribbling through opposing territory, the opposing player, who was part of the basketball club, did a quick cover. That moment, I saw someone raise their hand in the corner of my vision. I quickly tossed a pass intended to bypass the opposing defense. However, what I heard was an out-of-bounds whistle, and my teammate cursed at me, "What're you doing?"

"Huh? You were running there weren't you?"

I asked back, but my teammate answered, “I was on the other side”.

I cocked my head in puzzlement and continued to play, but on two more occasions during that game, I tossed a pass to someone who only existed on the edge of my vision, to the irritation of my teammates.

... What was going on?

As expected, I felt abnormal, and wandered outside the gymnasium. I went to the drinking fountain at the side of the entrance, turned on the water and drank as much water as I could. Then I sat on the bench to the side, and raised my head. The sky was blindingly clear. But despite it being clear, I felt like something was dark. As if the world I was used to seeing was slightly foggy. Like an old, discolored photograph, there was a world I wasn't related to. There was only a sense of dismay, as if me and the world I lived in had unexpectedly parted ways.

"I guess it's that thing's fault."

The notebook was still in my house.

I brought it home in the end, but I kept it tied shut with Yoishi's shimenawa out of fear, and placed it at the back of my closet. So far, I had been resting peacefully, as nothing had happened since — but a part of me must have still been worried about it. Maybe that's why I've been feeling like I've seen strange things recently.

Just then, someone sat next to me.

I subconsciously slid over a bit for them—

But when I saw the shoes they wore, my heart skipped a beat.

It was a worn sneaker. Tied with blue laces, worn without socks.

My whole body froze, and I couldn't move.

I don't remember how I was even breathing.

Sound disappeared, and the world was covered with white fog—

I just continued sitting there.

"Nice weather."

I heard a voice after what felt like an eternity had passed.

I snapped my head up, and saw Ishikawa's smiling face, who attended the same language class as me.

He was a pretty typical university student for this fairly well-to-do university.

"You okay?"

"... Uh, yeah."

My body was able to move again. I glanced secretly to the side and saw that there was no one sitting there anymore. I opened my fist, closed it. It moved. However, my palms were soaked with sweat.

"Just off work?"

"No."

"It looks like you haven't gotten enough sleep."

Hahahah, Ishikawa laughed. He was incredibly capable at getting good work, good company, and good connections, so when I looked at him, I suddenly felt ashamed at how terribly unrealistic and ridiculous my worries were.

"Hey, Nagito, listen."

Ishikawa looked like he wanted to talk and started jabbering all by himself.

"The other day, I had a joint party with some girls from a nearby women's university. One of them was a real softy. She started talking about the type of guys she liked, so I just indulged her. Then she gave me her phone number and stuff."

"Is that right?"

"She was kind of weird."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"But you know..."

Ishikawa spoke after a pause:

"I'd fuck her."

Those words made my intestinal juice churn. I felt as if I had been thrown into a filthy, sludgy factory effluent. I felt nausea rising in my stomach and I ran out of there.

When I stood up and looked at Ishikawa's face, it looked like something different. Like something dark and inhuman. I was going nuts. Anyway, I'm at my limit, I thought.

At that moment, the sky suddenly darkened. I thought the clouds had come out and looked up, but the sky remained clear. The clear sky stretched on forever. But it was dark. My surroundings alone were dark. I kept running, while being assailed by such an illusion. I ran through campus at lunch time, heading toward the western club building.

Having broken off ties with Yoishi, there was only one person I could rely on.

"Krishna-san!"

I arrived in front of the clubroom and banged on the steel door as I called out her name, but there was no response from inside. I peered through the foggy glass, and listened, but I didn't sense anyone inside. I leaned against the wall and pulled out my cell phone. I dialed Krishna-san's number, which had been written on her business card. The time it took to connect seemed endless, but I waited patiently, catching my breath.

《... Hello? 》

I became teary at the voice I heard.

"Krishna-san, I'm in trouble."

I felt like I was about to scream.

《What? What happened?》

"I think I might be possessed by something."

I told her everything this time, without leaving anything out.

I told her about the notebook I took out from the hospital. That I'd kept silent about it. How Yoishi was going to throw it away, but I ended up bringing it back home. And how my daily life was becoming more and more tenuous.

I told her everything, and pleaded:

"Save me, please."

On the other side of the phone, Krishna-san went silent.

I was prepared to hear her say, "You're hopeless." I didn't care how much she scolded me. I didn't care if she insulted me. Even then, she should be able to instantly come up with something.

《For now, all I can say is...》

I eventually heard Krishna-san's voice.

《Is that I can't help you.》

"Huh? Why?"

《I'm in Aomori.》

"-- Huh?"

Come to think of it, her voice did sound distant.

"Wait... why'd you go to a place like Aomori?"

《To correct my spine.》

"Why'd you go all the way to Aomori to correct your spine—"

《The spine is an air duct. Well, it'd be a long explanation, so leave it. But more importantly, my teacher's going to talk.》

— Teacher?

Ahh, come to think of it, Krishna-san did mention having a teacher... is she with that person?

As I was sorting things out in my head.

《Yo! G'day.》

I heard a man's voice, which sounded surprisingly cheerful. I heard Aomori, so perhaps due to the image of Mount Osore[19], I expected some old shaman lady's voice, so this took the air out of me.

《First of all, I want to check your situation. Is there water nearby?》

"Water?"

I looked around, and saw a sink at the end of the hall.

"There is."

《Alright, please wash your hands there first. Then wash the back of your neck.》

I dashed over there and did as he told.

"Done."

《Good. Now when you've wiped it well, hold out your left arm. 》

I followed his instructions.

《Lightly close your fist, and then repeat the sutra I'm about to tell you seven times.》

I frantically nodded, and chanted the sutra he whispered seven times.

"Done? Now, on all five fingers, with the fingers of your right hand, write the letter ogre (鬼), breathe out strongly, and immediately open them afterwards.》

I didn't understand. I didn't understand, but I obeyed.

My opened hand was drenched in sweat, and my fingers twitched, probably due to nervousness.

《— Then.》

His voice suddenly became lower.

《Which fingers are trembling?》

... Umm.

My middle finger was trembling a lot, and my ring finger trembled to match.

When I told him it was my middle finger, the man on the other side of the line went silent.

"Um... hello?"

... Don't shut up all of a sudden. You're scaring me too much.

"Excuse me. Can you hear me? Is it bad if it's the middle finger?"

I shouted, and from the other side of the phone, came a ridiculously bright voice.

《OUT!》

... Hey.

○

《... Hello? Hello, Nagi-kun?!》

"... Ah, Krishna-san."

《Can you hear me? Are you ok?》

I had lost consciousness for a moment from that "OUT!" shout, apparently.

I'd slumped over the sink.

"...Where'd that bastard go?"

I felt anger bubble forth and asked.

《Teacher's using clairvoyance on you right now.》

Krishna-san said from the other side of the phone.

《Well, we don't have a photo so all we have is the information and the direction. I don't know if we'll get any details about what's possessed you and what's causing it.》

"Is that teacher of yours someone trustworthy?"

I asked, and Krishna-san laughed a bit.

《Who knows, he's an oddball. But I am sure of his judgment. I can guarantee that.》

I didn't really get it, but the way she said that annoyed me. Was it jealousy of the trust she showed? Or maybe it was because that bastard shouted a ridiculous "OUT!" like it was none of his business. I didn't get it, but I decided not to trust that guy.

"So, what was up with the trembling fingers just now?"

《That was 'Shisoushiki-betsunodaiji' ('指相識別之大事'), a Nichiren Buddhism chant. It can tell what type of ghost is possessing you.》

"What did he mean by out?"

《Teacher said he didn't believe it either— but, the middle finger meant that it’s not a normal ghost.》

"Not a normal ghost... then what?"

《If I had to give a word, a god.》

"... Huh?"

《A high god or a demonic god — whatever the case, it's not an ordinary wandering ghost.》

Wait. Why's something like that possessing me — I thought, but then I remembered.

Come to think of it, Yoishi and I had snuck into a shrine at night and snatched a shimenawa. But wait, I wasn't the one that cut it, and I apologized more than enough. I understand apologizing doesn’t mean I’ll be forgiven, but this was pretty over the top.

《In any case, I’ll come back to Tokyo immediately. It'll probably be night by the time I arrive, so take a memo of what I’m about to tell you.》

I checked my pockets but there was no paper, so I bowed to a frightened female student who happened to be passing by in the corridor and who was eyeing me suspiciously, and managed to borrow a piece of pen and paper.

And then I said go on, to Krishna-san on the other side of the phone.

《First, throw away that notebook.》She told me.《The location should be somewhere people don't go. The reservoir that you and Yoishi went to should be fine.》

But, even after everything that had happened, I was still against it.

"Do I really have to do that?"

《I sort of understand how you feel. But that's the root of everything.》

"Why is that? What is that child—"

《In all likelihood, a myriad of floating entities are stuck to that notebook.》

With those words, I felt various scattered things rapidly merging together.

《I told you before that ghosts who have lost their purpose seek meaning, didn't I? I don't know who wrote the words on the wall. But it’s very likely that all of this is happening because those two sentences formed meaning as Kotodama.》

— I see. So that's how it was.

That's why Yoishi was trying to throw that away.

And Krishna-san said the words were bad.

But…

But, I was struggling to swallow the word "No", that was just at the tip of my tongue.

He was, me. He was just suffering. He just wanted help. He just wanted to get out of the hospital, and play and jump around and laugh like everyone else.

《Nagi-kun, listen to me. That kid's already dead.》 Krishna-san whispered.

《He's not in this world anymore. As long as you feel sorry for the boy, you're never going to get rid of the hauntings that befall you.》

I…

I....

I—

I was about to say something back, when I noticed. I slowly opened my trembling left hand. The trembling of my ring finger was even more intense than the middle finger.

"Um, Krishna-san."

I spoke to the other end of the phone with a trembling voice.

"Um, my ring finger is trembling really hard, too."

《— Huh?》

"Is this…?"

I spoke that much, when the cell phone became filled with static.

Suddenly, I could hear a gurgling sound that sounded like air bubbles floating on the surface of water.

"Huh...? Hello?"

《H... hello...?》

I could hear Krishna-san's voice from somewhere far away. But it was no longer a conversation.

There was static, then the sound of bubbles. And mixed in with that, I heard a low voice. Countless human voices overlapped each other—

《Don't listen!》

Krishna-san suddenly shouted.

"D- don't listen? Then what should I do?"

And then the phone abruptly cut off.

"K- Krishna-san?"

I tried redialing a number of times, but the phone never connected.

5

...What should I do?

The sun was setting, and I'd been desperately clinging to sunlight, but I was about to run out of places to go.

Anyways, to where people are — to a crowded place with lots of people—

I wandered aimlessly, and before I knew it, I was heading towards the main auditorium facing the courtyard.

However—

My feet stopped in front of the glass door to the auditorium.

Inside the classroom, a hundred odd students were seated, and a professor was writing on the blackboard on the podium. I could hear the sounds of notes being taken. I could hear the sound of chalk being chiseled on the blackboard. The auditorium was filled with the silent fervor of people doing what they're supposed to be doing.

I couldn't go in.

I felt ashamed. I felt shame toward my parents, and clawed at my hair. I was in Tokyo against the will of my parents, and even borrowed money from my sister. It wasn't easy for my household to pay my tuition fees. And yet, what in the world was I doing? I'd been mesmerized by the occult, going to places I was told not to go to, throwing it all away halfway through, and became possessed by something. I was living my life like an idiot, doing nothing but idiotic things.

Could I still return?

Could I still return to the right place?

As Yoishi and Krishna-san had said, I should just throw away the notebook. But the stubborn kid inside me vehemently refused to throw away the notebook. It shouted that it still didn't feel like the right thing to do. Part of me wanted to throw it away, and another part wanted to hang on, and it was also me that stood dumbfounded here and now. It was me that was tormented by all these complex feelings, and I was the one who was causing trouble for all sorts of people and straying further and further away from the path I should be walking on. Several me's were killing each other in a fierce battle that unfolded in my head. I was punching myself, stabbing myself, tearing at myself, ripping myself apart. A vicious war continued, and eventually, all of me died. As a result, my feet stopped, my thoughts stopped, and the me that was no longer anyone stared dumbfounded at the classroom — and there, I found the me I didn't know.

The seat I was always sitting in — the far-right seat on the fifth row from the front.

I was sitting there.

I was bored and listening to a lecture with a blank expression on my face.

At that moment, something inside me collapsed with a sound.

—Was it the other way around?

—Was I the ghost, and was he the real thing?

Nothing reflected in my eyes felt real anymore. I felt like I was the only one who had been composited into the finished film after the fact. My common sense was just a thin thread that connected me to this world. It could be cut off by the slightest thing. Like Zippo-san's friend, the strand was suddenly cut one day, and he couldn’t go back.

I wobbled away from the lecture hall, and before I knew it, I was sitting on a bench nearby.

I clutched my hair with both hands. I could hear the sound of cars in the distance like some kind of noise, and the flowerbeds, noticeboard

and dark trees in front of me looked like made-up props.

The normalcy of a place, common sense, all disappearing in one day.

I finally understood how terrifying that was. My sense of values was shaken. I lost sense of where I stood. I realized I was completely pointless. That moment, I didn't even cry. Because it was pointless. What was the point of a pointless person shedding pointless things? Emptiness produces nothing but emptiness.

—— How does it feel to be scared?

Yoishi had asked me before.

Yoishi, I get it.

This is what it means to be scared. To lose your place.

—This is it.

I raised my head, and in front of me was a white face.

Yoishi Mitsurugi's long, black hair was flowing in the wind, and her big eyes were looking at me.

"At this rate, you're going to die."

The high school girl in a uniform stood out on the university campus at dusk.

The university students walking by glanced in our direction as they went.

"Why do you wish to carry the darkness of others — to the point of suffering this much?"

Yoishi's glass bead-like eyes, however, lacked the usual hollowness.

Instead, there was light in them that wanted to know something other than "fear."

"Why...?"

Why was it? I didn't know. In fact, I was suffering because I didn’t know. I couldn't answer that question now. So I just talked, without knowing why.

"...Isn't that normal?"

"—What?"

"If someone's carrying something that heavy... don't you usually help them?"

"Even if it's a load you can’t handle?"

Her question left me stumped.

I didn't know. That's why I'd been sticking my hand in so many things and then leaving them half-assed. Then should I not have stuck my hand in them? Was that it?

"A load I can’t handle — eh? Shit."

I replied while clawed through my hair.

"It's not like I'm sticking my hand into everything I see. There's a basis—"

"Basis?"

"Because, if I were to do that naturally — it'd only be for friends."

I surprised myself when I said those words.

To be honest, the dead boy wasn't exactly a friend. Of course, I didn’t know his face and I'd never talked to him. But I certainly shared his pain. I was in the same state of suffering. As a child, I was always close to death, so the boy's wish was no stranger to me. Please fix my sickness. When I first saw those words, I muttered to myself:

—I can't do anything, but I can be with you.

That's why I took the notebook out of there with me. Just like how my mother, who couldn’t heal me directly, used to hold my hand for

hours until the attacks ended. Like how that hand was my only harbor in the middle of a sea of fear. I wanted to teach him that just by having one person by your side, people can overcome things.

"— I'm such an idiot."

Tears were spilling out of my eyes before I'd realized...

"I'm such an idiot," I kept repeating.

"Indeed, it's not logical."

Yoishi silently whispered, and then she suddenly pulled a cell phone from her pocket.

I thought she was going to call someone, but suddenly she began moving her fingers at a frenetic pace.

I thought she was sending someone a message, but her finger speed was unthinkable. Without blinking, Yoishi continued pounding away with her thumb, like a broken mechanical doll that was repeating the same motion over and over again. A drop of sweat appeared on her forehead, which then stuck to her hair, with her legs slightly apart, she stood there without moving, as if she was rooted to the ground. Only her thumbs wriggled at a high speed.

I stared, jaw agape—

And it continued for almost an hour.

Our surroundings had become covered entirely in darkness, and sometimes a patrolling security guard came by, I would bow my head, saying, "Wait a bit for her please." That's how much urgency her fingertips seemed to have.

The keystroke operation, which seemed to go on forever, ended abruptly.

At the same time, the unusual concentration and tension that had filled Yoishi's limbs was cut off. Yoishi crumbled softly to the ground — and I quickly caught her. For the first time, I found out light her body was.

"Hey, are you okay?"

I asked, and she nodded slightly.

"...What the hell were you doing?"

But she didn't answer, instead saying an inexplicable, "How comfortable."

"But this should solve everything."

And with that last line—

Yoishi's eyes rolled up and she lost consciousness.

○

"Are you alright?"

It was late at night on the same day.

Krishna-san shouted as she jumped into my room, and when she saw Yoishi lying in my futon, she began opening and closing her mouth.

"Ah... oh... you."

"... Yes?"

"You, a high school girl... are you serious! What're you doing bringing a high school girl into your room! And sh- sh- she's sleeping in your futon!"

For some reason, her face turned furiously red and she shouted at me like that.

Maybe this person was extremely weak to that type of topic?

"Well, well, Krishna-chan, calm down."

Karasu-san arrived then.

Changing the wet towel on Yoishi's forehead, she explained for me.

"When I'd come to pick up my belongings, I found Nagi-kun carrying this girl on his back and crying 'She collapsed, she collapsed!' And when I checked, she had quite a fever. My room's being used as a storehouse and has no futon, so we gave her medicine and laid her down here."

That's how it was, and still seated straight, I shot Krishna-san an insulted look.

"I- I see —— sorry. And, are you alright?"

She said, and Krishna-san placed a big travel bag at the edge of the room and looked at me. I noticed that there was a bit of displacement between her shoulder and her head.

"I don't know... but Yoishi said that everything should be solved."

"What?"

"I can never really tell what she's doing, and this time, I especially don't get it."

Krishna-san sank weakly to the floor and sighed. She must have really rushed over from Aomori. I felt sorry for her exhausted she was.

"I'm sorry for everything. I've caused you trouble once again."

I bowed my head deeply, and she venomously replied, "Indeed."

"It was quite hectic since then. I couldn't connect to your cell phone anymore, and our cell phone got interference——Anyways, I'll tell you what teacher said. The results of the clairvoyance."

She pulled out a thick memo pad from her bag and began reading.

"First —— the result of the "Shisoushiki betsunodaiji," you said your middle finger trembled. The middle finger, as we mentioned over the phone, is either a high god or a demonic god, but afterwards you said your ring finger also moved, right? If you said that earlier we would have handled it differently."

"What do you mean?"

"The ring finger means a living ghost."

"... Huh?"

No, wait a minute.

Living ghost? Like, when jealousy or hatred take a spiritual form...

"Yes, that living ghost. The person who fired it doesn't realize it either, a rather bothersome spiritual obstruction."[20]

Krishna-san explained it in a straightforward manner, but it didn't make sense to me.

"In other words, that's it, isn't it? I was going through all this, and the person who fired that off is just living happily every day, right?"

"Well, yes."

Instantly, the blood rushed to my head. I had been through the depths of fear and despair up to this point, and I was filled with an inexpressible rage.

"Who is it? I'm seriously going to beat the shit out of them."

I said with gusto, and Krishna-san shrugged her shoulders and said, "That's a tough one."

"Feel like going around punching every occult-lover around the nation?"

"..... Around the nation?"

"Well, to be specific, most of them live around the Tokyo region.

Because the rumors about the 'hospital that grants wishes' spread quite oddly around the Tokyo locale. In other words, those who believe the urban legend that wishes come true at that hospital based on false information, and feel hope - their wishes become living ghosts, which combine to form an incredibly large spirit that nestles in that hospital."

"Then, the man I saw wearing a kamishimo—"

"Probably a ghost floating about in the area. For a clump of spiritual forms, the ones that have the most memories are the ones that gain superiority. I said ghosts float about when they've lost sight of their purpose, but basically, that means the true suspect behind this incident is that huge living spirit. The large, floating ghost and the living ghosts then further combined, gathered around the urban legend that 'wishes come true,' and gained almost god-like spiritual bodies."

I was aghast, and Krishna-san turned the next page and read.

"And there is one more thing. There's a device that amplifies living ghosts."

"Device?"

"The internet."

Krishna-san pushed her red-framed glasses up with her middle finger, and stared at me.

"Ahh, it's pretty stupid — the fuss over that hospital on the internet. It's not like putting something randomly in the hospital in the proper position would be enough to grant a wish, and nobody's wish really came true. However, it is a place with that much focused emotion. I'm sure one or two ghosts existed. So they go there for a selfish wish, and then end up hurt. What do people do, then?"

"... Scum."

Everything was coming together.

Slowly, the feeling of hope would inflate. They would go there,

braving fear. Yet, nothing happened. Wishes were never granted. I would feel ashamed for believing such a thing — but there are people who refuse to let themselves be the only ones fooled.

"Yes — such a pitiful, helpless gathering of malice in letter form. The twisted desires transform into malice, and those call for even more crueler thoughts. The urban legend of 'the hospital that grants wishes' was born this way."

Was that why Yoishi said it was pathetic?

Didn't she say ghosts exist on the internet?

— I'd understood to that point, but I realized there was still a much more basic mystery standing in the way. Like the incident last year at that hospital. Where Yoishi alone had disappeared from the others, but there was a divergence in their memories. How could that be explained?

I asked, and Krishna-san shot me a somewhat reproachful look. She was probably worried about my exhausted spirit, but I begged her to tell me.

"Please tell me. I mean, if I don't solve that mystery, I'm going to die of shock from the delusion that's growing inside me!"

"Yes, well... maybe. You're quite delusional."

She insulted me, and then explained.

"It's simple. Because everyone Yoishi was with was a living ghost."

Those words gave me goosebumps.

Within that endless darkness—

I imagined Yoishi walking alongside living ghosts enjoying evil delusions.

"The members other than Yoishi had probably gone there to have a wish granted. In other words, when they saw the words on the wall, they wondered what was needed to grant their wish. They drew that

wish strongly in their mind. I think that's what Yoishi saw."

And then, with a very envious look on her face, Krishna-san looked at the sleeping Yoishi.

"This girl can probably see ghosts."

"Then Zippo-san's friend, only mumbling Yoishi—"

"A living ghost is a clump of dirty ego that people don't want others to know about. Imagine having this girl whisper those things to you in that situation."

I remembered Krishna-san's words some time ago.

That Yoishi easily crosses the boundaries.

Yoishi's words and deeds are filled with things humans must not know.

That is why her words and deeds always sway us, who live on this side.

Luckily, I was still standing on this side, but—

There was always the possibility that I would not make it back from the very edge of the boundary of this world.

And Zippo-san's friend was not able to.

"Anyways—"

Krishna-san muttered, scratching her bobbed head.

"In this case, we have to admit fault, too. Compared to the horror stories of old, that took time to change and mature, today's urban legends spread rapidly via the internet and undergo a dramatic chemical change at a certain point in time. There's no root behind them. Someone's irresponsible posts creates a chain effect that creates a magnetic field. It ends up attracting the real thing. In a way it's inevitable, because the dark part, where there’s no source whatsoever is the real thrill of the occult — but it all started when a symbol

appeared in a place where people were just gathering."

"That was, the words on the note?"

I asked, and Krishna-san sadly nodded.

"That's how desperate his feelings must have been."

— Please fix my sickness.

Those clumsy words reappeared in the back of my eyes.

Wanting to play outside, wanting to leave the hospital, wanting to go to school, wanting to eat a lot, wanting to play games.

At the very end, he returned all his desires to that place.

"Pure, yet powerful words — the Japanese people of old called them Kotodama."

Krishna-san concluded.

Silence filled my room, and we could only hear the low rumbling of my small refrigerator.

"But still."

Karasu-san who had been listening to us in silence up to that point, opened her mouth.

"Does that, really, solve everything?"

... That was it.

To be honest, I'd been wondering that myself. Was it possible to exorcise a god-class spiritual form? Just what did Yoishi do on her cell phone back then? Why did she look so satisfied before losing consciousness, saying that it was comfortable; that still bothered me.

Indeed, said Krishna-san, and she glanced at Yoishi's white face, as she slept like she was dead.

"She said she solved everything, right?"

"Yes."

"Hmph."

Pushing up her glasses, which had slid down a bit, she snorted.

"Well, we'll see. Truthfully, I don't sense much from you right now, and I'm personally very curious as to how Yoishi Mitsurugi exorcised all of that."

I, too, was too tired today to think about anything more complicated. My body still ached all over, it felt heavy, and my mind wasn't fully cleared yet. I could sleep like a log right away.

"Nagi-kun, if you want to sleep, you can use my room."

Karasu-san laughed, as I stifled a yawn that probably came about from relief.

"You'd be overwhelmed if you were to sleep in the same room as a high school girl, right? What youth."

W- w- what is she talking about?

I was about to say, but Krishna-san was the one who spoke.

"Y- you shouldn't, Nagi-kun! How... vulgar... you can't, you can't."

She was blushing bright red as she flailed about, and Karasu-san nimbly evaded her and sat down next to Yoishi. She then turned the towel on her forehead over and smiled.

"I see — this girl is Yoishi. Even though she looks so cute asleep."

Karasu-san muttered somewhat entranced, but—

Well, as long as she stops vomiting and takes a bath every day, I would agree.

“Well, I’ll accept your kind offer.”

When I said that and stood up.

"Nagi-kun."

Krishna-san called to me from behind.

"You've done enough for him."

"....."

"I will take responsibility for the notebook and give it to a proper farewell somewhere appropriate. I won't treat it with disrespect. Alright?"

I don't know why, but tears filled my eyes.

With my face turned away, I nodded repeatedly.

○

After that, my body felt lighter day by day.

Strange things stopped happening after that. I didn't see the man in a kamishimo. I didn't hear the sound of flutes. I didn't sense any creepy people. And more than anything, the world was bright enough for me to want to skip around.

On such a day, when I had regained all my energy, I passed by the main gate of the affiliated school on my way to Krishna-san's room in the western club building. Seeing the high school students on their way home, I wondered about Yoishi.

She was already gone the next morning when I returned to my room from Karasu-san's luggage room. There was no letter or anything, but the futon was folded up again. I fearfully took a whiff, but only the scent of my shampoo remained. That was the last I saw of her.

— In any case, I should at least say a word of thanks.

Is what I thought, as I waited for Yoishi to come out, but she didn't.

Eventually I grew impatient and asked a random student about Yoishi Mitsurugi.

"She's probably still in the library." They said.

She was apparently a problem child that rarely came to school. In addition, all the students had an aura of not wanting to get involved with her, which made me concerned about her daily life.

So, I hurried to the city library, which was under five minutes away, on my mama-cycle.

I passed by the receptionist, and glanced through the reading seats in order, and found Yoishi in her school uniform by the far window. She was mesmerized by a thick book.

"Yo, what're you reading?"

I called out, and she answered without lifting her head.

"Kürten's manuscript."

"Who's that? An author?"

I sat across from her and asked, and she shook her head.

"A famous German serial killer. His murders were so abnormal people couldn't arrest him until he turned himself in."

I was dumbfounded, but she continued with a somewhat ecstatic expression on her face.

"Kürten's orgasms, where he ejaculates while killing, are very interesting."

I took a peek, and it was a book with gross monochrome photographs that made me want to look away.

"Oh, well."

I cleared my throat and said what I came to say.

"I don't know what you did, but my body feels lighter and I stopped

seeing weird people too. And Krishna-san took care of that notebook. In any case, you saved me quite a bit. Thanks."

I bowed my head.

"That's good."

She mumbled, and she grabbed the book and bag as she stood up.

She carefully returned the book to the shelf, and began walking to the entrance.

— So, what the hell did you do?

I was almost about to ask, but this time I restrained myself. Krishna-san said I had no capacity to learn, but that wasn't true. Even I had room to grow. There are areas in this world where it was impossible for me to go to. I learned that the hard way this time. So I restrained myself, and saw her off as she walked away.

However, a few meters ahead of me, she seemed to remember something, and turned around.

She came back next to me, put her face close to mine and whispered softly in my ear.

"You shouldn't look at websites related to that abandoned hospital for a while."

"... Huh?"

"Farewell."

And with that, she just walked away.

I stood there dumbfounded for a bit—

But something bubbled forth, an immense level of curiosity.

No, wait, stop it. I'm the type that goes when I'm told not to go. It's an uncontrollable habit I've had since childhood. And of course, I could already imagine I would end up crying and wishing I hadn't

done it in the first place, but — before I'd realized, I'd already taken my cell phone from my pocket. Just a bit. Just let me take a quick peek, and if it's dangerous, I can just close it. That's what I told myself.

I immediately accessed the internet, and randomly did a search for "Hachiouji" "abandoned hospital" "wish." A bunch of pages I'd looked at before appeared, and for the time being, I opened the first one.

However—

"... What the hell is this."

I was surprised, and checked other sites.

"... It's the same."

All the sites had stopped updating after a flurry of posts. The date of the posts was exactly one week ago. They matched the time and date that Yoishi had been typing on her phone.

"Did she post this?"

Fearfully, I read the post.

And at the top of the post, I immediately understood.

They all began with that famous line.

【Read this story at your own risk. Please accept that before proceeding】

The self-responsibility type horror story that was famous around the internet.

They say that just by reading the creepy tale, you begin experiencing spiritual disturbances, and they always have endings that lack closure. Some say that the character strings themselves hide words for summoning ghosts, and other rumors say that there are words within that are designed to make your guardian spirits disappear.

I read a bit more and immediately understood. It was about an

'abandoned hospital', no matter how one reads it.

"... I see, that's a nifty idea."

The only way to erase the desire for the 'abandoned hospital' was to make it a taboo subject.

It was a story of a girl attracted to the "abandoned hospital" that slowly stepped foot into a world of madness.

I was drawn in from the beginning. The writing was chilling and the description of the gradual disintegration of her personality was terrific. The somewhat twisted backdrop felt very real, and the horror stories she spoke of, the real ones that made you feel uncomfortable, every part of the writing was overflowing with that odd sense of discomfort. Yoishi was able to write like this? I was surprised, but at the same time, I was extremely curious about the ending.

In the library, as the sun set, I found myself clutching my cell phone close to me as I read, entranced by the story. The gradual usage of hiragana, as if to depict the crumbling mind, was terrifying. It was like Algernon. I held my breath and followed the letters with my eyes as I thought this. I read on, not caring for the chills I was getting. And finally, when the girl was led by fate down to the basement of the hospital once more —

Suddenly, the screen of my cell phone was covered.

When I looked up, I saw that Yoishi had returned and was reaching out with her hand.

And with her dark, deep eyes gazing upon me—

"You shouldn't read until the end."

And those were the most terrifying set of words I'd heard in the past few days.

Case 03: Beyond the Fusuma

1

I was in a dream again that day.

It was an afternoon right smack in the middle of summer, and I could hear cicadas somewhere. It was such a hot day that I could feel sweat dripping down even if I were just sitting still, and I sat on the porch of the house, staring absent-mindedly at the garden.

At some point, the girl belonging to the house had taken a seat by my side.

She wore a white shirt and a plain skirt. I couldn't figure out what era this dream chose as its setting by what she wore. Still, I thought it couldn't be too far from my time. In this dream, The girl couldn't see me.

That's why we didn't so much as exchange greetings. The girl stepped down from the porch, poured water into a small tub, and then sat next to me with her feet in the tub. She looked absolutely beautiful as she sat there using a small fan to send a breeze around her neck. Her black hair was carefully tied behind her, and the way she always had her lips closed expressed her upright personality.

The girl and I simply sat there in silence. The bamboo trees on the other side of the white wall swayed from the wind and made rustling sounds.

This world was peaceful, as it had no other sounds.

Or it should have been--

I had a feeling, which was closer to conviction.

A sad premonition that this dream wouldn't have a happy ending.

This one large Japanese-style building that was covered in a somewhat bluish tint.

At some point, I'd started seeing the dream of this house over and over again.

There were times I'd see a continuation, and other times that it seemed like time had skipped. But being a dream, I'd eventually awaken. That's why I'd slowly begun to enjoy these dreams -- but at the same time, I'd begun to feel sad whenever I awakened. Eventually, I'd come to realize that the emotions I felt were tied to the eventual sad conclusion that this mansion faced. I often saw the blue world stained red, the girl a bloody heap on the ground.

This was clearly a lucid dream. In other words, a dream that I am cognizant is a dream even as I dream.

Normally, dreams have unique attributes that make them stand out. Lucid dreams in particular usually cause you to have an omnipotent feeling because you can cause anything to happen. However, this dream always gave me a nagging feeling of a lack of control.

Why?

Shouldn't I be finding out?

And then I began investigating the nooks and crannies of this house.

The house in the dream had, roughly speaking, a cast of four. At the center was the girl, who smiled at everyone like a spring breeze, and there was also an old man of around fifty, presumably the lord of this house and probably her father. Furthermore, there were two other men, who seemed to love the girl, and who also seemed to be her cousins. I also saw servants entering and leaving every so often, but we can probably put them aside. The house had a main hall around 81 sqm at its center, with the room of the master of the house next to it, and next to it was the girl's room, and then further than that were the rooms of her cousins. There was a kitchen, a parterre, a parlor,

and a room for servants. I would answer yes if I were asked if it were large, but there were also plenty of houses around this size in the countryside from which I came. It didn't strike me as particularly uncommon, and I simply wandered about.

Windows and sliding-screen doors held no meaning to me, given that I was like a ghost in this world. I could enter anywhere I wanted to if I wished. However, the more I roamed the house the more I had this bizarre and out-of-place feeling.

There was something wrong with this house.

I began to think that. And then I felt like I'd sensed this oddity before. And when I thought about it, I realized: it was like that house. The "house that grants wishes" that I'd stayed in when I first came to Tokyo. A house for the house that had been built by a heart-broken architect. It was the same sense of misplacement that I felt then.

That would mean.

That there should be a room that could not be entered via normal means. A space that had been deliberately sealed away.

I felt some misgiving, but I decided to look for that room, anyways.

However, I would always forget about that goal whenever the dream began, and only after gazing at the various events occurring in the house (such as an amusing conversation between the girl and her cousins, the houselord having trouble with the trees in the garden, as well as when there's some trouble between the servants) do I eventually remember that room. And then I would begin searching, but time would run out and I would awaken. It was almost as if once I remembered the existence of that room, the administrator of the dream would kick me out.

Of course, in the end, it's still just a dream.

Not everything needed to make absolute sense. In particular, looking at the girl's spring-like smile makes me feel like such a room doesn't really matter at all. Was it wrong to just wish for the girl's happiness? Isn't it enough to just watch over the girl's beautiful mannerisms?

There was always something nagging at me from the corner of my mind, but that's what I'd begun to think.

But, when I was rudely lying down on the porch and gazing at the girl pruning the trees in the garden, I heard a familiar voice from above.

"This house is quite interesting."

I looked, and for some reason, Yoishi Mitsurugi was there.

"Everything here was built to further seal off something that had already been sealed."

She whispered, as the dark eyes on her white face glimmered.

"You-"

I pointed at Yoishi as I spoke.

"You, what are you doing in my dream?"

○

I opened my eyes and found myself in a car.

I was in the back of a damn small light vehicle and about to be crushed by a number of bags.

I tried to straighten myself out and was shocked to find someone's fragrant, black hair right up at my nose.

I hurriedly pushed out with my hands, and that person lazily slid back over to the other side, like a rotten corpse.

"It- it was your fault!?"

I shouted, but Yoishi Mitsurugi kept sleeping as if she were dead.

"Shut up, Nagi-kun."

Sounded the cold voice from the driver's seat.

I looked up, and found Krishna-san glaring at me through her rear-view mirror.

"You made me miss what the GPS was saying."

Those words finally jostled my consciousness back.

The sunlight shone brightly through the car window as the car drove westward with full speed. I could see the Pacific Ocean expanding in my view, glimmering on the other side of the window.

That's right… we're in Krishna-san's old car.

And I was on my way back to Fujieda.

"This GPS is old, so it takes a really long time to get back on track once I miss the road. It's like it's punishing me for not paying attention to it."

Krishna-san, who was extremely poor with any machine other than a computer, desperately tried to adjust the GPS, but the old LCD display started to give even more inexplicable directions.

"It's because you bought such an old car."

I said with a somewhat teasing tone, and she quickly fired back.

"I was told this was a bargain, and I really liked the design, too."

"You get too empathetic over everything, Krishna-san."

"Shut up. If you're good to machines, your feelings will eventually reach them."

"You know, Fujieda should be a short drive off the highway."

"Don't blame me, the GPS told me to go this way."

I sighed. We'd done that exchange several times already in this tiny car.

Well, all of this is because I struggled with the first-semester exams at my university, and then I forgot to buy train tickets to get back home.

That was yesterday. After I finished my exams, I was sleeping like a log to make up for my sleep deprivation. And then my cell phone rang… my sister was on the other end.

"So, we're getting ready for the festival tomorrow. When're you getting here?"

My brain cells froze for a moment, and then pulled out some latent powers without any regard for how overheated they were from my exams, like a divine revelation, it came to me…

Krishna-san had certainly spoken about it. At the end of July, she was going to participate in the Ikaigabuchi offline meeting taking place in Shizuoka. Moments later I called Krishna-san and cried, please let me tag along.

And now, I'm being shaken around in this cramped car.

"That's why I tried to stop you."

Krishna-san said with an annoyed voice from the driver's seat.

"I'm not a good driver, and this car's an almost thirty-year-old can of junk. You're the one that insisted, anyways. I have so much stuff to bring to the offline meeting, so you're the ones making things worse. It's usually just fine when I'm the only one here--"

And then she looked back at us, at Yoishi, who slept between the luggage like a broken doll.

"It's pretty insane to try to fit both of you in there, you know."

"I agree, but you know, I'm not the one who dragged her in here."

And then, Yoishi whispered, still in a crumpled posture.

"You're the one that told me to come to Eboshi Mountain."

".....Huh?"

That moment, the car took a bounce.

For a moment it felt like my stomach was turning inside-out, but I frantically held that back. And on the side, I looked at Yoishi's face, and her usual pale face had become ashen-blue.

"Hey! You! Don't puke here!"

"What?"

Krishna-san shouted back in a frantic voice, but by that time Yoishi had quickly opened the rear-seat window, stuck her head out, and vomited.

"Hey, you!!"

Astonishingly, a blue sports car that was driving right behind us zig-zagged. I think they probably managed to avoid the vomit with their nice judgement. After that, the sports car kept a large distance away from our car. Their intense glares toward us were actually hurtful.

After Yoishi finished vomiting, a little bit of drool still remained on her lips as she closed the window and went back to sleep. It couldn't be helped, and I took out a crumpled handkerchief from my pocket. Don't get on a car if you have a habit of throwing up, I grumbled to myself as I wiped off her mouth.

I ended up meeting up with Yoishi Mitsurugi mysteriously early this morning. Krishna-san and I were to meet in front of a room in the university. It was loaded with video cameras, tripods and computers. Over there, Yoishi aimlessly arrived.

"You- What are you doing here?"

Of course I asked her that question, but she didn't answer.

It was already summer vacation for the public, if we were any more late in our departure, the roads would be jammed with traffic and that would have been troublesome. For the time being I ignored the vacant Yoishi still standing there.

First, I loaded the goods into the car. The small car barely had a

trunk at all, and most of the front passenger seat was already occupied with Krishna-san's clothes and books related to the occult. That's why I loaded up the rear seat with cameras and other things, along with my own luggage.

I managed to cram it all in somehow and managed to make a place for myself to sit. But before I knew it, Yoishi was already sitting there. Naturally, I told her to move, but she just silently closed her eyes. No matter how many times I told her, she didn't move. Thanks to that, I ended up having to sit bending backwards in the middle of the luggage like a prawn.

Remembering this, I looked at Yoishi. After puking out the window she had deftly pulled a book out of her backpack, and was now staring at it in her lap.

"Hey, Yoishi."

I pointed at her clothes and asked, "Why did you come to school so early in the morning, while still wearing a school uniform even when it's summer vacation?"

"It wasn't early at all."

"Eh?"

"Because last night, I was in Tsukimori cemetery for a long time, that's my way back home."

"Ah… So you stayed out all night and arrived the next morning."

Or should I say, what's up with staying at Tsukimori cemetery all night and returning back the next morning?

As I thought that, I got confused and shook my head.

"Actually, it's fine. I won't ask what you were doing. It was probably some weird stuff anyway. But once we get to Fujieda, you must get in touch with your household. Don't worry your parents like that."

With Krishna-san in front of me, I said that, acting as the dignified senior.

"Where will the offline meeting for Ikagebuchi be held, I wonder?", said Yoishi while ignoring me and asking Krishna-san.

"In Shizuoka city. There's interesting research being announced about Konohanasakuya-hime[21]", answered Krishna while driving.

"That was originally called a banana type myth in South East Asia, there are some unique Japanese descriptions that I can't accept. There have been researchers of Konohanasakuya-hime in Shizuoka for a long time. They are going to supplement those shortcomings by presenting a hypothesis, that's why I'm going."

Krishna-san seemed to be in an unusually good mood. Because her occult website Ikagebuchi was famous at a national level, offline meetings and searches of haunted places were being held monthly. I was just attending the meetings that were being held in Tokyo as much as possible, and naturally I hadn't yet followed the forum threads of Shizuoka.

"A lot of things happened and I was restraining myself on attending offline meetings, but I've had a lot of interest in Konohanasakuya-hime, so I just have to attend the meeting."

"Is that so?"

Konohanasakuya-hime is about that, a female goddess from Mount Fuji whose had various theories about her deification. She married the grandson of the sun-goddess Hononinigi, gave birth to three children, one of whom was Hoori. He would be the ancestor of the Japanese royal family, even I knew that much.

"Your family's fire festival is also perhaps, derived from that lineage," said Krishna.

"Konohanasakuya-hime's, whose fidelity was suspected by Ninigi, gave birth in the midst of fire. That legend was used as a model for the often occurring fire festival everywhere… Or I wonder if it belongs to another legend altogether?”

"I don't know about the details, but the festival in our home town was originally dedicated to the mountain god. Making portable shrines,

parading them downtown, and finally burning them. At that time, the electricity of the town is mostly shut off, leaving only the light of the iron basket fire. That spectacle, how should I describe it…? Beautiful, just like a dream."

"I'm looking forward to it," said Krishna-san while driving the car; her voice seemed to be in a happy tone.

I haven't told my family about it yet, but in exchange for driving me back, I promised to let her stay at my house. Well, Krishna-san is polite and courteous; I don't think she would be a problem at all, the problem lay with Yoishi.

That girl is completely unpredictable, if it was concerning her, even a chat over tea would turn into a ghost story. Especially, as my elder sister had said, this years' fire festival is to be organized by us: the Yamada family. It would be nice if we could carry out our responsibility safely, I reflected, as I pondered over such dark thoughts.

"It's no good," said Krishna all of a sudden, slamming down on the car's GPS.

"I didn't say anything…."

At that moment, an unpleasant thud sound was heard from the engine. Before long the car gradually slowed to a halt.

"Even though we left with a full tank of gas…." mumbled Krishna in a timid tone of voice as she glanced back at us.

I looked towards Yoishi feeling she might be responsible for what happened. But Yoishi was reading a tasteless book on the medieval history of execution tools on her lap as her eyes glimmered.

○

After the continuous struggle through the highway, on top of its engine stalling four times for no particular reason, the car finally

reached my home. The sun had already gone down and it was evening time. We parked Krishna's car in the field which served a dual purpose of being a place to cultivate and to store lumber. During this time, I saw the figure of my older sister in jeans and a T-shirt coming out of the front door of the house.

"You're late, Nagi-suke! What were you doing, slacki-"

As she said that, my sister fell silent seeing the two strangers who had stepped out of the car.

"Eh, this is..?"

"Nice to meet you." Krishna-san introduced herself while politely bowing her head. "I'm Nagi-kun's senior at university, Kurimoto Shina. I'm always being helped by Nagi-kun with various things."

"Oh, is that so..?"

With that introduction, my elder sister replied in a polite and courteous attitude that I hadn't seen up until now.

"I'm his elder sister, Akira. It's a pleasure to meet you, thank you for looking after my little brother."

After that, I pushed Yoishi -- You also introduce yourself, dumbass. Yoishi just stood there staring silently. It couldn't be helped, I thought, as I introduced Yoishi.

"This is Yoishi, Yoishi Mitsurugi. Uhhh…."

What would be a good way to explain my relation to her?

"We belong to the same group with shared interests, right?…."

With Krishna's impromptu commendation, my elder sister stared in amazement.

"Ehh, you're still a high schooler, right?"

When asked that, Yoishi just silently raised one finger.

“A first year high schooler?”

Yoishi nodded.

Was that so? Even for me, this was my first time hearing about it.

“Even though you seem to be quiet, you sure are very beautiful.” The candid line from my sister made Yoishi tilt her head slightly. I’m afraid any moment now, she’ll say something like, “Does that have any meaning?”

“Why! Yoishi-chan is a beauty, and Krishna-san is cute as well, which one will be this guy’s wife? Or how should I put it… It’s not my place to decide, is it?”

What are you saying?? This person…

I stood dumbfounded glaring at my sister whose long and bright hair was swaying, Krishna-san decisively took a deep breath of air and spoke.

“It’s so scenic and beautiful around here, and the air is great to breathe; it’s a really good place, isn’t it?”

“Only because it’s the sticks,” laughed my sister.

“Anyway, it’s only my mother and father besides me living here, so we have a lot of rooms, please feel free to relax.” Saying that, she invited both Krishna-san and Yoishi inside.

While I was undertaking the work of carrying the luggage, I squinted at the base of the mountain, which was dyed in sunshine. At the entrance of Eboshiyama, the path to the temple already had a wooden structure constructed; a few adults could be seen working around there.

The cold wind blowing down from Fuji, and the hot wind rising up from the Pacific Ocean, entwined with the breath of the forest and blew a unique kind of wind in Fujieda. Being struck by the wind on my cheeks, I was hit with the realization . . . I was finally back; in my home town, where the fire festival would soon begin.

2

“Ah! Nagito!”

Welcome back, said my mother smiling fondly at me.

“Returned, have you?” remarked my father curtly while lying on his back.

Well then, I should talk about both my parents here a little bit.

After all, it was a story told to me by my dad who tended to boast about himself, but I want to tell one third of the story.

When my father was young, he was known to be an outrageous brat, if you were to put it in modern terms, a DQN [22], Yankee, or one of those delinquents who teams up with other delinquents and roams the streets. In short, he was a hooligan. I don't know what I didn't like about it when I thought about it now, but he rebelled against a lot of things.

Fights won: 75, lost: 12. His influence reached as far away as Yaizu city. The name Kanto Yamada, made those near and far tremble with fear. Those legendary tales still seems to be talked about at neighborhood association meetings: He had eliminated monstrous catfish living in the Kasuga pond; he caused ill-mannered sailors who had strayed into Yaizu city from abroad to go back to their home countries with just one glare, plenty of these kinds of iffy stories typical of the countryside.

My father was that kind of man, who after graduating high school, had no intention of inheriting the family’s lumber business. He spent his days lazily; drinking sake, gambling, getting into fights, womanizing, and acting violently. At last, it could be said that he finally drew the attention of the god from the shrine of three-god-mountain. From that day on, for causes unknown, he got a high fever

and fell down, hives developed on his face, a rash on his arm and warts sprouted on his legs. So my father, who was always over-confident in his looks took a painful blow and prepared himself for a painful death. But, if he was going to die anyway, he would forcefully take down the incarnation of the mountain god with him; my father schemed up something completely ridiculous like that, like he was going to live shamelessly and shortly anyway.

Uttering that line like a high schooler who had watched too many heroic movies, my father's younger self grabbed some gasoline and a lighter and headed off in the direction of the three god mountain shrine. However, the shrine maiden was sweeping the temple grounds at the time, my mother: Nogi Tomoko. What's more, my mother had only just enlisted as a part time apprentice, but still, she eloquently managed to preach to my father. You can't have such a short temper and such, you are still young, behave yourself from now on, and such. However, the self-proclaimed number one wild boy of Fujieda prostrated himself in front of my mother, the shrine maiden who was not even dressed stylishly. He'd come prepared for death, but instead ending up proposing to her at that place. This is what is known among us in the Yamada family as, the ceremony of the angel Tomoko causing Kanto's submission.

Or rather, no matter how dubious this overly long story might be, it seems to have been the start of the romance between my parents. I don't want to go into too much detail about why they called her an angel Tomoko, even though she is a shrine maiden. Anyway, it's been 24 years since then and they're living a happy conjugal life here in Fujieda. I mean, my father pretended to be the domineering husband, but he was just so deeply in love with my mother.

"Have you lost a little weight?"

My father and elder sister had went to the living room to make arrangements for the visitors who had come from far away, at that time my mother asked stretching my cheeks with her hand.

"You've had it tough in Tokyo, haven't you?"

"Well, a lot of things happened."

I almost unintentionally blurted out everything that happened with me up until then, the fearful experiences I had gone through in Tokyo; I was on the verge of spilling it all: Being chased by the countdown of death and the fear of not having any place to run away to, the spine creaking fear I felt when we took down that unbelievable giant floating matter. Well, in the first place it stemmed from me being an occult maniac, but in this short time I've gone through consecutive perils which seem to have worn away my lifespan. I don't even know how many times all I wanted was return home to Fujieda.

But… " I don't know if you heard from sis, but uh… First, the house I rented ended up still being occupied by the previous owner; then because of some difficulties I had to go to the hospital, when I was there I ended up being examined by a completely incompetent quack." I was bad at lying, and made up some sloppy falsifications. In the first place, saying something about being possessed by ghosts would probably not be believable. In any case, it's not a problem now, everything is already over. Nevertheless, my mother still stared at me with a look of worry in her eyes.

"Sounds like you've had an awful time."

"No, well, it's not a big deal." After that I sat up straight and apologized once again. "With that being said… I'm sorry mom, I was in the middle of writing letters and messages to you, but various things happened, and I ended up unable to send them. I'm fine, and I'm now back home."

When I said that, my mother gently narrowed her eyes and laughed.

"I got that; you also brought along some friends as well?"

"Aah… Sorry, one of them is a person who helped me out, and the other is… someone who ended up getting attached to me."

"Hah-? "

Ignoring my mother who was staring in amazement once again, I took that out of the bag. The thing I had bought from the western dress store closest to the station: A cardigan.

“I bought it quite a while ago, but it’s already summer. Well you can wear it when autumn starts and it gets cold.”

“Even when you don’t have any money, is this alright?”

“I bought it from the first month of my part time job’s salary. Anyway, it was rather cheap.”

With that, my mother delightfully opened the parcel, and took out the cardigan.

“It’s a nice color isn’t it, I’ll be sure to treasure it.”

I nodded, and at the same time, wild laughter echoed from the living room. My father and sister had probably used the pretext of entertaining guests to start pouring sake. “Well Nagito, shouldn’t you also be there?” “Aren’t you coming as well?” I inquired “I haven’t made dinner yet, and you need to eat a lot, don’t you?”

“Well, to be honest, I didn’t eat a lot on the way here.” I laughed while standing up, “Then, we’ll be waiting for you.”

◯

“You’re late, Nagi-kun!”

When I opened the Fusuma[23] of the living room, I found the manager of the occult site standing atop a desk making an uproar. Her face completely red, she was wearing a hyottoko mask slanted on her forehead; the mask was originally a decoration piece in the living room.

“W-what are you doing Krishna-san?” “Drinking, of course…The sake here is amazing. It’s my first time drinking pulpy sake which soaks into my stomach.”

“That’s great, Krishna-chan! Keep going like that!”

“Oh! We still have plenty of sake!”

With Krishna-san like that, my elder sister and father vigorously

poured more sake, overflowing the cup. The big table in the living room was lined grand with sushi catered from outside. Empty bottles of my father's treasured sake and my sister's favorite beer were already emptied on the floor.

"Hey! Yoishi-chan, was it? You also drink some more!" Seeing my red faced sister trying to influence Yoishi, I stepped in.

"That's unwise. She's still a high school stu-"

"Don't be so stuffy, Nagi-suke, I was in middle school when I started, right?"

"Right, because you are special."

"Wha- Hey! Special, you say?"

"You are exceedingly special, that's why involving yourself with a docile girl like her is a little pitiful, it's for the best!"

"Oh, I get it, well then Yoishi-chan, will it be cola, or some orange juice?"

Yoishi replied silently by pointing to the orange juice. While merely taking a sip of the poured orange juice to get a taste, she merely looked around in silence at the ceiling and walls of the residence.

"Hey, Krishna-san has been poured quite a few drinks already, right?" I quietly asked, sitting across from Yoishi.

"Probably", replied Yoishi quietly.

"Be careful and don't drink with them, OK? My father and sister aren't bad people, but they have a habit of drinking a little too much."

My father, red in the face, shuffled towards us. In his hand was the famous local sake brew: "Kurasui".

"Go ahead Nagito! You have a drink as well!"

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm still underage."

I tried hard to push it away from me, but as expected from a man of the mountains, he was way more physically stronger than me. With his thick arms he forcefully grabbed my arm and didn't let go.

"No, aren't you around twenty years old by now?"

"Hey, at least bother remembering the age of your own son."

Being drowned in breath smelling of liquor, we continued talking when the front door bell rang. "Gooood Evening!"

The door opened and a familiar voice echoed in the hallway.

"Oooh!"

I recognized it by the voice, the bad company from my high school days had joined in.

"It's good those guys came", I somehow managed to get away from my father and headed to the front door to greet the guests. There, the nostalgic faces were all lined up. The eccentric square faced guy with the family surname of Marui[24]: Maru-yan. Then there was Ranbashi, He'd lost some weight and gotten taller; he was actually pretty strong in fights but usually well mannered. Finally there was the guy always making trying to look cool and only chasing women, Hirayama also known as Pei chan.

"Oh, Nagi, is it?"

"You've returned!"

"You haven't changed."

"You guys haven't either, have you been well?"

I bumped our shoulders and arms with each of them in our unusual way of exchanging greetings; my elder sister then arrived. "The appetizers are here!" And she snatched away the food Maru-yan had brought as a gift.

"Your sister is the same as always."

“Sorry, there are a lot of guests today so she’s frolicking about.”

“Guests?” Maru-yan asked inclining his head slightly as the manager of the occult site appeared staggeringly from the living room. Kirshna-san was now wearing the Hyottoko mask completely over her face.

“Ooh, Guests, is it? No, wait, am I the guest?”

“Hey, who is that?”

“Ah”. I took off Krishna-san’s mask and introduced her to the rest.

“She’s my senpai from university, Kurimoto-san. Various things happened, and we drove here in her car.”

“Is that so?”

Being slightly taken aback, the three bowed their heads and greeted.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Marui.”

“I’m Hirayama.”

“I’m Ranbashi.”

“Ahh, I’m Kurimoto, I’m Shina. Before I knew it, I ended up being called a scary name like Krishna.” Krishna-san replied while bowing unsteadily on her feet. After that she smiled again as she spoke to me.

“Hey Nagi-kun, I’m a little relieved. I thought you were a complete loner with no friends, but you do have some friends who have common courtesy after all.”

After that I beckoned the three in.

“Ah please come in.”

With that, Krishna-san who was acting self-importantly, disappeared into the living room once again.

“It seems to be getting pretty exciting around here” said Maru-yan happily while taking off his shoes. All I could do was shrug my

shoulders.

The first one to enter the living room, Ranbashi raised his voice in surprise.

“A female high schooler. There’s a female high schooler here.”

“What did you just say?”

“It’s true. It really is a female high schooler!”

These three raising a ruckus all of a sudden, I asked exasperatedly:

“You guys have surely seen high school girls up until last year, right?”

“You idiot, all men don’t understand the preciousness of it at the time. After graduating, I’ve come to appreciate the figure of a high school girl in her uniform. I’m in agony over the fact that I didn’t enjoy the springtime of my youth to its fullest.”

“Pei-chan, it’s fine so just take a seat.”

With that, even the usually reserved Ranbashi howled:

“She’s an angel! I’ve never seen a girl as pretty as her.”

But, even with such a ruckus being raised in front of her, Yoishi was sitting with a dreary face drinking orange juice. I introduced the Yoishi to the three.

“This is Yoishi Mitsurugi, she’s a member of the same circle as me and Kurimoto back in Tokyo, well, that sort of thing.”

“Oh, Yoishi-chan, is it? Good evening.”

Immediately after Pei-chan’s greeting: “Uwaaaaa--!” Maru-yan let out a shriek.

“Dammit, I should have also gone to university in Tokyo! Hey Nagito!

Can you meet beautiful girls like this in the city all over?”

“Not really all over or anything like that!”

“But you… with these two…”

“Calm down Maru-yan. I’m saying they’re just my senior and juni--.”

“Square faced and fair spoken, you sure are cute…” Krishna-san came staggering in and put her hands on my shoulder as she tried to join the conversation.

“Hear that, Nagi? That's how I'm usually treated! You're always making fun of my childish appearance, but I'm actually quite popular, alright?”

“Yeah, you're famous and popular alright… among occult maniacs all over Japan, that is.”

“That’s just cruel, it’s like you’re trying to say I’m some kind of UMA[25]. “

“I’m not trying to say that at all.”

“Hey Nagi-suke! How long are you gonna stand at the entrance? Sit down. Have a drink!” My sister yelled and dragged me to a seat in the center.

“Everyone! Here’s to Nagi’s homecoming!”

“Oh! Welcome back!”

“Cheers”.

“Hahaha”.

They all leisurely raised their drinks up in the air.

“Thank you, I’m back” I also raised my glass; the party became a mess immediately after that. My father began dancing; my sister started singing. In the corner Krishna-san started telling an impromptu ghost story. Pei-chan, who hated scary stories tried to

escape, but Ranbashi, wearing a straight face, kept him tied down. My mother kept focusing on the dinner intently, and tried to make sure we didn't run out of drinks. I didn't even drink a drop of sake, but after a long time I got drunk on the atmosphere of my home, I watched over the scene with a feeling of lightness wearing a slight grin.

At that moment, I suddenly realized…Yoishi had vanished before I knew it.

"Damn, where did she go?" I looked around restlessly and…

"Oi, Nagi."

Maru-yan came crawling towards me.

"Where's the bath?"

"Huh? You wanna take a bath?"

"I'm hopeless".

"What's wrong?"

"I was knocked down by Kurimoto-san's breasts."

"Huh?"

"She's gonna use the bath, right? I'm gonna confirm the location of the bathroom beforehand for that. There has to be a window somewhere." Maru-yan spoke with a sleepy look in his eyes.

"You… were forced to drink some alcohol, weren't you?"

"I drank…no, I didn't drink..."

"Which one is it?"

"I don't know but, I haven't had such a fun night in a long time. Maybe I'm drunk on the night? No, I'm drunk on Kurimoto-san's breasts and Yoishi-chan's beauty." "Ah-- Where did that Yoishi go?" I asked diverting from the topic. Maru-yan pointed unsteadily towards

the outside.

“She just left. Is it the bathroom? Is it??”

…No way. I don’t think she would go take a bath voluntarily like that. Pushing away the clinging Maru-yan from me, I opened the sliding door and went out to the corridor. I followed the path of the veranda out into the garden to find Yoishi standing out there alone.

“Yo, what are you doing in a place like this?” I called out to her back, but she continued staring at the base of the mountain. I put on sandals heading out in the garden and stood next to Yoishi.

“It’s because it’s the sticks, that’s why there’s so many stars.” But Yoishi, without answering, pointed straight ahead. It was the way to the three gods’ mountain shrine.

“What is… that light?”

“Aah, that’s the iron basket fire for the festival, they’re going to try and keep it lit until the day of the festival.”

“It’s moving.”

“Huh?” I too, strained my eyes around halfway up Eboshiyama at the glimmering light. Now that you say it, I do feel like it is moving.

“What could it be then? Could they be switching the iron basket fire?”

“Hmmm…”

I looked at Yoishi, in the moon’s pale blue light reflected on her cheeks; she looked even paler and transparent than usual. At this late hour, what was she doing here? A strange feeling came over me. I...I felt like some other color of paint had spilled into my own palette. No, that wasn’t to say it was an unpleasant feeling, but…

“My household…is quite noisy, isn’t it?”

“That’s right”, she replied without hesitation while continuing to look up at the base of the mountain, then quietly whispered. “But, this is

where your precious roots lie.”

That night, I was in that blue world again. In that old and large Japanese style house, roaming about in that dream. However, for some reason Yoishi was with me from the start, it apparently seemed to be a continuation of the dream I had recently.

“Well, why are you here again?” I asked, and Yoishi replied with a shine in her eyes.

“To find the entrance to the closed room.” Like that, she began arbitrarily walking briskly towards the back of the residence.

“Oi, Wait, Damn it.” It can’t be helped, I chased after her; midway through, I ran into the daughter of the house and her clingy cousins who were following her around. They walked alongside the daughter, as if keeping each other in check while talking to her. Even someone like me, who was ignorant about love affairs, knew a passionate battle was unfolding between the cousins around the daughter. Nevertheless, it seemed that they still couldn’t see us. The daughter passed through without exchanging glances with me, the two cousins continued to gaze at the daughter as they left. Yoishi didn’t try avoiding the daughter and the cousins as they passed right through her. As expected, it seemed Yoishi too, was an invisible spirit in this world.

Why am I’m thinking such carefree thoughts? Wait a minute. I was originally searching this residence for a happy ending to this dream. Instead, I had ended up searching for the true face of the lurking omen that was present. And when I’m with her, doesn’t this ominous premonition accelerate even faster? My wild imagination was spurring me towards eerie events unfolding. And then wouldn’t Yoishi’s eyes glitter, and I would end up in tears like always?

--It’s not funny.

Panicking, I put my hand on the shoulders of the advancing Yoishi.

“Hey, wait. You go back, this is my dream. Don’t just barge in here

with your shining eyes like you own the place.”

But Yoishi replied without stopping.

“My appearance in your dream, it’s not my fault.”

“….Oof”

“This is no more than a dream you willingly dreamed, with me in it.”

it was a fair argument to make, It was hopeless to try and refute that,

“Then I’ll say it: I’m hoping to lead this dream to a happy conclusion. Which is why I’m begging you, just don’t say creepy things, ok? Don’t start saying things like ‘It’s strange’ or anything like that again, ok?”

However, even within a dream, Yoishi was still Yoishi.

“Say, have you heard the story of a dream you can’t wake up from?”

In that usual manner of hers, once more her dark eyes began to shine, and doing as she pleased, began to tell a story.

“Once you start watching a repeating dream. The occurrence of the dream increases in frequency gradually, before long you end up not being able to return from the dream world, that kind of ghost story. Or when you wake up from a dream, you hear the sound of a dripping wet mop from somewhere feeling someone’s presence approaching you; or how about the manifestation in reality of something you saw in a dream; there are various patterns, but in the end, the dream encroaches on reality resulting in death is the common thread.

“H-Hey, Don’t mess with me. Are you saying this dream is that?”

“I don’t know, but there’s one thing I’m curious about.”

With that lowered whisper, a detestable premonition set in and I put myself on guard.

“In this mansion, there is no outside.”

“…Huh?” Now that she said it, I haven’t been outside this mansion before. The story always concludes inside the mansion.

“No, wait a minute, that’s because I always wake up at that time, if I walked there, I could easily go out, right?”

Well, let’s try it out then, Yoishi opened the fusuma[26] close by and headed towards the garden. Passing by the two rooms, we headed out in to the garden. Past the courtyard, In front of the entrance there was a large plaza with many cars parked. Yoishi, without stopping, continued to the front gate. Before long, we arrive at a large wooden gate standing sturdily in place, bolted with the wood of the hinoki. I was unsure if I could shift it with my power alone. But right alongside it, we found there was a smaller side entrance, so I pushed it. But, it didn’t budge in the slightest. Feeling befuddled at that moment, it soon struck me: As an existence akin to that of a ghost in this world, a door didn’t actually mean anything. I could just as easily pass through it. Thinking that, I pushed my body against the door itself, but for some reason my body was repelled. Something made me feel that a strong will that I hadn’t felt before was there.

“No way.”

I took a few steps back, and dashed toward the door crashing into it with my full force. But with a violent thud, I was repelled back and fell down. I had been drifting in this place for so long, and yet, I realized that the laws of physics applied to that door alone.

“You can’t leave this residence. Right?” Whispered Yoishi questioningly while I was still lying down on the ground.

“Why is that?”

“Ordinarily a lucid dream is said to be one established by the ego. That dream world should be actively controlled and freely manipulated by the dreamer. But in this dream, there are two things you can’t control freely…” Yoishi’s dark eyes suddenly began to be filled with life – I put myself on guard.

“That is, the closed room and yourself…”

I was half expecting that.

Yoishi spoke with an entranced expression.

“This dream probably has a hidden meaning”.

3

In the afternoon, the temperature had already reached 35 degrees. The sunlight was hitting like a hammer today. It was scorching enough that it felt like my hair would burst into flames at any point. One a day like this, I thought, it was insanity to construct the pedestal to be used in the festival, but when I put on a towel around my head and joined, everyone was lively, I also got caught up in it and ended up joining them in the hectic work.

My town -- Nango Town, was one of the smaller ones of Fujieda City; but nevertheless, whenever this festival draws near, people gush out from nowhere and before you know it, the front of three mountain god shrine ends up being overflowed with people. The job of constructing the festivals' pedestal is always given to the young men of the city, but like my sister said, it was said to be our family's responsibility this year. But still, in actuality it was being done by all the guys from downtown who were free at the time.

Today too, the front of the mountain shrine was crowded, in that crowd, I could see many nostalgic faces; at that time I would stop working, greet and have a deep talk with them. Everyone was wearing a smile on their faces. The old lady from the neighborhood who brought refreshments was also pleasant; being in this kind of atmosphere, it really made me realize that the festival was near.

"Yo, Nagi."

Being greeted from behind, I turned around to see Maru's square shaped face.

"Seems like the pedestal has begun construction, it really feels like the festival is getting pretty close, eh?"

"That's right" Wiping off my sweat with a towel. I inquired:

“What about Ranbashi and Pei-chan?”

“They’ve got work in the afternoon; they may come in the evening.” Is that so? Come to think of it, among the lot that I used to hang out with in our high school days, only me and Maru-yan went on to higher studies. I went to a university in Tokyo; Maru-yan to a local technical school. His family owns a small restaurant; he too liked to cook so he decided to become a chef.

While recollecting such things, Maru-yan abruptly began to examine my expression.

“Are you sleeping properly? You’ve got dark circles under your eyes”

“….Aah.” To be honest, I felt like I wasn’t getting enough sleep recently. I had pulled consecutive all-nighters during my exams, after that, I was seeing the dream with the mansion every night, Furthermore, searching with Yoishi in the dream day after day. By itself, the dream is a place where I can drift around comfortably, but she just wanders here and there going “It’s strange” or “How unusual”, saying creepy things like that and bringing me to tears even within a dream. Originally, my sleep time meant for me to rest but my brain had naturally become exhausting because of this.

However, Maru came to his own conclusions, and, smirking, commented, looking somewhere off in the distance:

"Yeah, well, if I lived under the same roof with two hotties like that, I wouldn't be able to quit fantasizing either."

“What?..”

As I followed his gaze, I saw two girls vying for the title of Japan's most obsessed lover of the occult. Krishna-san, dressed in a pink t-shirt with a piglet on it, was helping out with catering preparations. Yoishi, on the other hand, was loafing about as usual, tight white blouse and black tie of her school uniform standing out against the picturesque countryside.

“Are they staying for the festival?”

“I think so, since they didn't leave after the offline meeting.”

“So there's one more reason to look forward to it," Maru grinned.

“Say, is it alright if I visit you again today?”

“Sure, but why?”

“For Yoishi and Krishna, of course. Pei-chan wanted to come too, and it seems that Ranbashi is also interested in Yoishi.”

“Listen, Maru-yan” I said sighing and putting down the lumber I was carrying. “Give it up. You don't want to mess with them, especially Yoishi.”

“Why?”

“She’s not normal. How should I put it? When you listen to her speaking, you’ll end up shaking and crying, or like the feeling of your soul leaving your body. “

When I spoke of her like that, I remembered…

- Yoishi is not a living human.
- Anyone who comes in contact with Yoishi will die in seven days.
- Anyone connected to Yoishi’s ghost stories meets a terrible end.

That is… just like those rumors spread on the internet about Yoishi in the past, they were just made up exaggerations…those words I had refuted in the past were not much different from what I had just said. I shook my head and corrected myself:

“No, In short… she just has taste in slightly different hobbies from the norm.”

“Well, that’s fine, city girls are like that, and I wanted to get to know someone who’s a little eccentric.”

It’s like this guy doesn’t get it all. Well, I wasn’t much different back then… I didn’t believe the rumors on the net either, up until I prowled around a haunted place with her.

You'll get cursed just by talking to her. If you meet her you die. Those kinds of rumors were spread because her speech had a strange pull. Like Kirshna san had said, her words contain things people shouldn't know. But, I didn't know how to explain that to Maru-yan who had no interest in the occult.

"Oh—Maru-yan" With long hair tied up like a pineapple, my elder sister appeared.

"Square faced as always"

"Oh, Thanks for the meal yesterday."

"It's fine, I had fun as well." Saying that, with a whomp, my sister suddenly punched me in the gut. I buckled over instantly grasping for air.

"Say Nagi. I've taken a liking…"

"T-to what…?"

"Krishna-chan, she'll make a good wife, don't you think?" She boasted while using the broom in her hand as a cane, she's only twenty two still a bachelorette, yet she acts like an old village hag match maker nodding to herself.

"That's right? I've got to try, don't you think?" said Maru-yan earnestly as if embarking on a new venture.

"You Idiot, A wife for Nagi here".

"Why is that? This guy doesn't seem to think like that".

"Oh, is that so? Are you in the Yoishi faction then?" Staring in amazement, I waved my hands as if to say no.

"It's really not like that with those two."

"Don't be shy now. I mean for a wife, it's better for you to choose Krishna-chan. Someone like you who's always in a daze… an older wife would be just fine. She was asking about the three mountain god to the head of the neighborhood association just now, and he was

also buzzing in admiration about her -- that she was so young and so knowledgeable.”

That’s obvious. She is the manager of a huge occult website that earns tens of thousands of hits a day. According to Karasu-san, she is a person who has applied for collaborative research with professors of folklore at various universities.

“Compare that with Yoishi-chan, who’s rather eccentric”. With those words, I looked towards Yoishi, she was sitting near the shrine archway. And I was dumbfounded at what I saw. For some reason, Yoishi was digging up the base of the archway of the three mountain god shrine, with a seemingly smiling expression. “Yeah… definitely a little weird”. Muttered Maru-yan as I rushed over to Yoishi in a hurry.

Her expression of ecstasy had been brought forth by digging out something she wasn’t supposed to.

“Oi! Don’t do stuff that’ll get you cursed.” I rapped Yoishi's head as she poked around the base of the torii with a sharp stone picked up from somewhere nearby.

“Ow! That hurt”

“Sure it did, now what were you doing there?”

“This place is interesting.” Yoishi looked up towards me. Her eyes were shining brightly, I quickly regained my composure.

“That’s fine; I don’t want to hear it.” But Yoishi continued speaking without a care.

“I wonder if everyone is aware. The torii is in this direction-“

“That’s enough! Stop it already!” I screamed. Was it because I had been out in the sun for too long? Or maybe because of a lack of sleep, or perhaps because of the hidden meaning in her words. I felt unsteady of my feet, as if gastric juice was welling up inside me. Don’t say anymore unnecessary things, is what I wanted to say. Menacing me in my dreams, and scaring me in reality as well, where was I supposed to run to?

“Why? It’s an important thing” Yoishi kept crouching down looking up at me with her dark eyes.

I stood there taking a deep breath, staring at Yoishi. Her school uniform had become crumpled already. The same white blouse had become wrinkled after being worn for a few days. Her hands were dirty from messing around in the dirt; she hadn’t taken a shower so her naturally long and beautiful hair was dirty again. As everyone was merrily going about their work with a smile preparing for the ceremony, she was looking up to me with an ominous gaze as if she were a lone, corrupted entity in all of this.

“Why are you like this?” I asked feeling dizzied under the strong sunlight. “Why do you always say things like that? Isn’t everyone having fun with the festival preparations? This festival only happens once every three years. It’s a small town but everyone adjusts their schedule for this day. So I’m begging you, just read the atmosphere. I’m not asking you to help or anything, just don’t get in the way. Don’t try and ruin things at least!” Oh, I think I may have overreacted. I don't know why I suddenly snapped at this girl who was younger than me. I should have stopped, but due to the lack of sleep, her tendency to do strange things that made people around her look askance, and the fact that I wanted to improve her situation just a little bit, I couldn't help myself. I had already crossed the line; it was too late to retreat.

“Why can't you live like a normal person? You have to go to school and learn to talk to people normally. Otherwise you'll have a very hard time later in life.”

Yoishi looked down in silence.

“What do you mean by normal?”

“Huh?”

“In this world, is there any worth in conforming?”

The darkness in Yoishi's eyes seemed eternal. More so than time at the Hachioji hospital; more so than the night at the reservoir, the darkness was even deeper. "No- that is... There's many disagreeable

people, so it's obvious, anyone who can't adapt to that will find living difficult, right?"

"Adapting? I wonder if that has any meaning" Yoishi stood up with her hands still dirty staring off somewhere. That back of hers looked slender and unreliable as always. Anyways, I was tired and irritated: of her, and her words. Tired from my exams, tired of my dreams, I had no energy to comprehend what her words meant.

“Anyway, just don’t get in the way of the festival.” I said over my shoulder as I left Yoishi and returned to the preparations for the festival.

--

On that night, it was a full moon. I was looking happily at the beautiful full moon’s perfect circle, holding the bat tightly in my hands. The location was the garden at the back of the house. Why was I standing here alone while being stung by striped mosquitoes? That was entirely Maru-yan and the others’ fault. After we had finished the construction of the pedestal for the festival, Ranbashi and the others had gathered at my house for a party at evening time. While helping out my mother, I was keeping an eye out for Krishna-san, who had an extremely anti-alcoholic constitution, as well as the underage Yoishi to make sure that my father and the others would not make them drink any alcohol. However, Krishna-san would get intoxicated just by the smell of alcohol alone, and after about 30 minutes, was once again dancing around wearing the tengu mask. The problem occurred after that.

My mother announced that the bath was ready and urged Krishna-san and Yoishi to take a bath first. That moment, I witnessed Maru-yan and Pei-chan’s suspicious behavior. After a while, they fled to the hallway. I had a bad feeling and chased them outside, catching them in the front door.

“Where are you two off to?”

“Nowhere-- just to observe the moon for a little bit.”

“Liar, you’re going to peep in the bath, right?”

When pointed out so bluntly: “Please look the other way, Nagito” Pei-chan exaggeratedly begged while putting his hands together and raising them over his head in supplication.

Not a chance. “Are you animals? Have you lost your senses?”

“Peeping is a man’s romance, a deed that humanity must carry”. Maru-yan came up with such absurd reasoning, I firmly shook my head.

“It’s no good; I’m going to stand guard until those two step out of the bath.”

“Well, we’re going home then”. Maru-yan quickly replied.

“How’s that? You can’t stop us from leaving.”

“Are you really going home?”

“If we stay here, it would be agonizing, so it’s better to say good bye and leave here, right, Pei-chan?”

“O-oh..! That’s right. Let’s go back.” They both exchanged looks in a strange way, and the way they were nodding to each other in unison was pretty suspicious.

Oh, you’re leaving already? Replied my sister as the two bid their farewells and left. Seeing the two off in silence, I looked into the tatami room. Ranbashi was trapped alone with my father as he narrated his tales of heroism from his younger days. I could trust Ranbashi based on his personality. But those two wouldn’t possibly go home so obediently like that, I thought. With that, I returned to my room for the time being, and grabbed the wooden bat from my elementary school days. After that I thrust a flashlight in my pocket and went outside. I took up position in the rear garden on the north side of the house, and stood guard outside the window of the bathroom.

It wasn’t like I didn’t comprehend the feeling of wanting to peek in on women taking a bath, but I was indebted to Krishna-san, and I had said some harsh things to Yoishi in the afternoon; that feeling of remorse mixed in, is why I stood guard here alone. The bathroom’s

window was slightly open, a few meters ahead of me, the light and the steam was drifting from there. I was relentlessly chasing off the striped mosquitoes that were coming close to me.

“I really am quite weak with alcohol.” Soon I heard her, the voice of Krishna-san.

“Hey, Get in already.” She called out to someone. Probably Yoishi, I thought. Incidentally, I had requested Krishna-san in the afternoon, to take Yoishi with her when she goes to take a bath at night. As far as I knew, Yoishi had not stepped into the bath even once since she had come here. I was afraid my family would say that to me as well, which is why I requested Krishna-san. If Yoishi couldn’t wash her body or her hair herself, it’s regretful, but would you do it? Is what I asked.

“Hey, don’t get in the bathtub so suddenly.” Came Krishna-san’s voice from the window, along with the lively sound of a splash and bubbles. I plugged my ears, but that didn’t stop the scent of the shampoo drifting in my direction. My mind gradually got stimulated. This is crazy, isn’t it like I’m the one peeping in this scenario? I fervently shook my head but, the image of those two naked was vividly being drawn in my mind.

“Those are what are called worldly desires, Nagito.” I heard a voice and looked around at the fence to see Maru-yan and Pei-chan’s faces peering in.

“You’ve arrived, have you…? You shameless lot…”

“The shameless one here is you”. Brazenly, the two climbed over the fence slowly.

“Hey, don’t come in.”

“Be quiet, Nagito. Otherwise they’ll hear you.”

“That’s why I’m telling you not to come.”

“Silently, we’ll reach there. After that it’ll just be fun in our day dreams.”

One way or the other, they climbed down to the other side of the fence, and crouched over to my side.

“If you take one more step from there, this is going to roar.” I readied my bat. Ok, we get it, the two whispered. That moment, another splash, and the sound of flipping hot water was heard.

“Hey! I’ll wash your head, so look over here.” Spoke Krishna. Soon, the shampoo’s fragrant scent would once again drift our way. I turned around just then to make eye contact with Maru-yan and Pei-chan. Their faces were stretched outward to the maximum limit.

“Don’t smell it! Don’t listen!” I spoke as the two replied in unison:

“That’s impossible.” They blurted out in hoarse tones.

“It’s so good.” “A woman is so good.”

“I can’t bear it.”

They kept repeating things like that and mumbling. Ah, I know! I know these things already. After all, I was trying frantically to suppress the squirming lower half of my body. So stop speaking already.

“However, I have a question.” Yoishi’s voice suddenly rang out.

“What do you need to eat, to get big breasts like that?”

“Hey…“

“Naturally, women's breasts swell. But your breasts are clearly outrageous”

“……..”

“I pressed my nose in a hurry. I felt like something warm was pushing up from the back of my nose. However, something red was already hanging from the nostrils of Pei-chan and Maru-yan.

“How should I know? I didn’t like my breasts becoming this big in the first place. I think yours are just about right.”

“Mine are almost non-existent”

“Isn’t that fine? Look, they are just fine. They fit in the size of a woman’s hand, just the right size”

I thought she was flat chested, so that’s what it was. I unintentionally pictured it.

“Is that so, I wonder? I’ve read somewhere that that an unmanageable size is the best.” Came Yoishoi’s rebuttal. “Oval in shape; white and lustrous, like ripened peaches, or watermelons about to burst. I wanted you to tell me if you had a secret method.”

At the same time as suppressing the delusions bubbling forth, I was cheering Yoishi on to give more descriptions. Suddenly, before I knew it, the maple in the backyard was shaking. Pei-chan was shaking it in order to endure something. Maru-yan was holding it back from shaking desperately. Both their faces were so flush they could burst.

“T-that’s enough! Stop it, this topic of breasts” With Krishna-san’s shy voice, the discussion on breasts was over. The sound of the boiling water became more furious than before, the steam and scent overflowed all the more from the window.

“By the way, why are you clinging to Nagi-kun?” Krishna-san’s inquiry brought about a temporary silence in the bath. That’s right, I recalled as I finally regained control of myself. Certainly, that is a problem. I did say I would show her Eboshi mountain, but at that time it was just a figure of speech, in the first place, mountains of this height were plenty in Tokyo.

“What? Is it inconvenient for you?” Yoishi’s words brought about another silence. Suddenly with a thump, I was struck at my side. When I looked, Pei-chan was glaring at me a dripping nosebleed. Oh, it’s like that, is it you bastard? He whispered. I waved my hands as if to say no.

“To begin with, was your coming here even meaningful? Did you have any interest in the three god manifestation fire festival?” “I did have an interest, but perhaps a different aim than yours”.

“What’s that?”

“Originally, I heard that the festival started as a thank-you to the mountain gods of this whole area that flourished in forestry. However, if we assume that, there will be various inconsistencies.”

“……..”

“I thought you realized it” ….What is it? What is this discussion? I was puzzled.

“Don’t pry into that, Yoishi.” Krishna-san spoke sternly. “The village has its own circumstances. In ancient places where people live, circumstances which outsiders can’t perceive, those kinds of things. Moreover, in that kind of process, the circumstances pile up. An outsider digging up that kind of stuff isn’t good.”

“Even if that was related to a curse?”

….What? What curse?

“That festival was not born out of thanks or reverence.”

“Even if that were true…” Krishna interrupted Yoishi’s words. “There are many festivals where the conditions changed after many long years. Now, it’s just a festival of gratitude. It’s only held to exorcise any impurity. Don’t speak of what was sealed here once in the past. This town… is tied to that fire festival.”

The conversation had completely become occult focused, my erotic thoughts quickly withered away. These two are always like this. After all, there was never a time when these two got along like young girls playing house with dolls. Nevertheless, standing in the same posture for a long time made my legs go completely numb. I unintentionally staggered from my spot. I ended up leaning on Maru-yan who, in turn pushed down Pei-chan.

“Owww!”

Raising that kind of voice, we fell down in unison. The bat I was holding also dropped down making a rattling noise and breaking the flower pot that had been left there.

“W-who is it?” Krishna-san’s voice roared from the bath, at the same time Maru-yan and Pei-chan dashed out of there. They jumped the fence like flying monkeys and disappeared on the other side. I tried to follow, but my legs were still numb, I made for the fence but my legs slipped and I fell again. This time, a different flower pot was broken.

“Oh! Hey, Yoishi!” When I heard Krishna's voice, I involuntarily turned around. There, in the wide-open bathroom window, stood Yoishi. She was staring intently at me, covered only up to her waist by the wall.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ah... I... Well, it's...”

Despite the light coming from behind her back, which obscured all the important details, I could make out the outline of the girl's body. Her pure white skin and the flawless curves of her figure were capable of depriving me of sleep for years to come.

“Don't forget that if you peek,” she said, looking at me coldly. Something warm dripped from my nose.

“...someone might peek back.”

4

That night, I couldn't sleep as Yoishi's naked body kept flickering in my mind. Before I knew it, I was once again drifting in that blue dream world after falling asleep. Looking around me, now I could confidently say this place had become a second home for me: The old Japanese style mansion. As always, I began to wander lazily around the mansion. Yoishi was by my side on this day as well.

"Before we wake up, let's find the entrance of that room." Her dark eyes shined, with her usual black and white school uniform, she spoke with enthusiasm. Promptly taking the lead and walking forward, she opened the fusuma door completely and wandered around.

"Hold on."

Still confused between reality and dream, I spoke out to her:

"That was….I wasn't trying to peep in the bath. I was trying to stop the peeping toms from going there."

"I don't care." Said Yoishi without looking back. "Why does this mansion have a room you can't get into? Why can't you go out of this mansion? I want to find that out today."

….That's right. This girl didn't even have a general reaction of being embarrassed when seen naked. She only cares about paranormal events. Going on a trip without bringing a change of clothes, not taking a bath, vomiting everywhere, not helping out at the festival, digging around at the tori of the three god mountain shrine; that's the kind of girl she was. I had completely forgotten because of that juvenile peeping scene at the bath. Breathing a sigh, I followed her. The dark, chilly, heavily worn floorboards gleamed in the dim light filling the room. Without knowing why, I thought it was early in the morning just before the sun was about to rise. The air felt tense, as if

prickling my skin. It was the first time it was nighttime in this dream. it wasn't like the filter of a bluish 8 mm film I was used to, it felt as if I were drifting at the bottom of the pale blue sea. The air felt traced with stickiness, I rubbed my body to get rid of that feeling.

Without a care, Yoishi continued exploring the mansion opening the fusuma doors, I was looking into the rooms after her when suddenly, in one of those rooms, I saw the girl of the mansion sleeping there and became flustered.

"Hey, Yoishi! Everyone is sleeping, leaving the doors open like that is rude." Yoishi suddenly stopped. And looked back at me and stared at my face intently.

"Did you just say something?"

"What I'm saying is that we shouldn't leave the doors open for people who are asleep…"

"Where was someone sleeping?"

"Eh?" I took one step back and stood in front of the room the girl was sleeping in and pointed there.

"Isn't she sleeping there?" Yoishi silently came to my side and took a look into the room. Then silently shook her head.

"I don't see anyone."

"Eh? But, the girl of the mansion is—"

Yoishi cut me off halfway: "People are living in this mansion?"

"….You never saw them?"

Ignoring my question, Yoishi continued, asking how many people there were in total.

"Uhhh…. The ones I know of are the head of the household, his daughter, two cousins. Also, the servants are also around here somewhere…"

“What are the characteristics of the head of the house? The daughter? Do the two cousins resemble each other?” Being asked questions in rapid succession, I explained the characteristics of the family as well as I could remember. Yoishi remained silent for a while listening with her hand on her chin, before long she uttered something cryptic.

“The two cousins may be pointing to something”

“The cousins?” I mean, weren’t they just supporting characters? The daughter had been firmly established in my mind as the main character in this dream. However, Yoishi had come up with something, Is that so? She muttered as she suddenly closed the fusuma in front of her. And she vigorously ran off from that place.

“H-hey, Yoishi!”

While I was still dumbfounded, Yoishi was running around the mansion, closing all the fusuma and sliding doors that had been left open.

“Hey, What are you doing?” She didn’t answer. Before long she returned again to where I was standing in front of the daughter’s room when she pointed to the door.

“Open the fusuma”

“Eh?”

“This time, open it with your own hands.” What is she saying? I wondered. Yoishi’s facial expression suggested she would keep silent and not move until I did as she said. It couldn’t be helped, as I turned to face the fusuma door.

Is this what they call a Kayou pattern? The blooming flower was thinly drawn on the fusuma with streamlined brushwork. Finally, I put my hand on the fusuma, but did not manage to grab it. My fingers slipped as they passed through.

--Ah, that’s right. When I think about it, I hadn’t opened a fusuma door in this dream before. I thought I would try to open it, but each time my fingers didn't work and the sliding doors just moved subtly, so it became troublesome and I passed through as it was. It was a

dream after all, I didn't think it was strange or anything. I was a spirit in this dream after all.

"Isn't this hard?" I asked Yoishi, who silently opened the fusuma door again, and closed it again.

"It's simple."

"…Is that so?" Once again, I tried to put my fingers on the Fusuma. Like before, my fingertips did feel something but, they just ended up passing through and I couldn't open the door properly. Without knowing why, a chill crawled up from under my feet. Yoishi could easily do something I couldn't, she also couldn't see the people in the mansion.

Did she perceive the dream differently from me? No… Thinking about it rationally, Yoishi was a part of my dream, and it would be correct to assume that the Yoishi in my subconscious was saying something weird again.

"That's enough." Yoishi nodded slightly. I shook my head.

"Wait. A little bit mor-"

"It's fine. You can never open the fusuma"

"….What, did you say?" That shouldn't be possible. It was just because I was lightly drifting around, that was why I couldn't grab hold. As I was about to say that, Yoishi announced something strange.

"I'm sure that for you, the fusuma is not a thing you can open."

When I heard those words –I heard a creaking sound from somewhere. It echoed from somewhere in the mansion is what I thought, but in fact, it echoed from inside me. A rustling sound that felt like it had echoed from afar, innumerable echoes ringing, and becoming louder, finally converging together. When I realized they had changed into someone's voice.

Opening it is forbidden. This room belongs to「xxx」. Absolutely must not be opened. That voice, where was it from? Before I knew it,

my knees where trembling furiously. It was incomparable up until now. Even in that strange house, even in that hospital late at night, they had not trembled so much.

“Is it scary?” I heard the usual line from her. “Do you feel fear now?” Those eyes, endlessly dark, filled with unending darkness. I trembled all over; I felt I was confronting something extremely ominous.

Yoishi is not a living human being. If you meet Yoishi by chance, you will die in seven days. Those who come across Yoishi’s ghost stories meet a terrible end. Those kinds of urban legends on the internet were vividly becoming real and cornering my heart and soul. The whole mansion quickly became distorted, and, that might have been because of my scream, I thought. This was not just my dream world: when my heart and soul became exhausted, this world too, would distort. But – Originally it was just supposed to be a dream. And yet, why did things become so fearful? If I wake up now… the usual everyday routine would be waiting for me, wouldn’t it? However, I had been gazing at this dream for too long. And, this dream which already had Yoishi included in it had become a continuous story. Suddenly the word "possessed" crossed my mind. And I was reminded of the phrase a woman who had once been with Krishna said, "It's already gotten a bit inside."

I – looked silently at Yoishi’s face. Is she trying to destroy something important of mine? The moment I realized that, a chill ran down my spine. This blue world was just a dream. It was the same dream I had seen repeatedly, but I wasn't scared to see it. Rather, I had enjoyed wandering about. Certainly, I had felt the presence of a hidden room; it might have been an influence of ‘the house that grants wishes’. This kind of exhaustion hadn’t set in until, she appeared. That’s right; it was her words that had brought upon such hopelessness and distortion. Just by having something connected with her, is enough to manifest a door to the underworld. If she opens her mouth, that door is sure to open. You’ll end up seeing something you’re not supposed to see.

But,

“If, you really are scared…” Yoishi spoke with a different air than usual. “It would be better to not continue from here on.”

“…What?”

“If you continue from here on, you might end up seeing something you’re not supposed to see.”

“……”

“The thing I can say for sure is that you have to open the fusuma door yourself to finish this dream.”

I didn't understand anymore. The tremors of my feet were even shaking the whole mansion. No, this blue dream world itself was shaking and distorting. It would be the correct decision to end this dream. It would be correct to end it without seeing something I wasn’t supposed to see.

However…

“….Yoishi, I can’t take it anymore.” I spat out. “I didn’t believe you were a cursed person, or that someone would die if they came in contact with you. But I can't do it anymore. I’m scared” I spoke while slapping my shaking knees. “I’m…scared of you.” I knew those kinds of words would usually hurt other people. But I really was a coward after all. I may have liked scary things, but I had no tolerance for them. I realized that I didn't have an inquisitive mind about the strange and unknown like her. My spirit, worn out by various things, was fragile and at its breaking point. It was as if my nerves had peeled out of my skin, on top of that, Yoishi’s words were painful. If I continued to listen to Yoishi, I couldn’t get rid of the feeling that something inside me would crumble and disappear without a trace.

“--I’m sorry.” I bowed my head as I apologized. “Please disappear, Yoishi.” Gripping my trembling knees, I beseeched the Yoishi in my dream. It was a dream I was dreaming willfully, yet, I didn’t want to see her shape anymore, I wished that from the bottom of my heart. Whereupon, something in the blue dream world began to shake; I slowly raised my head to see no one by my side. I looked behind and in the surroundings: Yoishi’s figure had completely disappeared. I let out an unsteady breath, and crumpled to the floor. More so than Yoishi disappearing, it was a sigh of relief that I was once again, in control my dreams.

That's right… This was after all, my dream in the first place. With renewed confidence, I once again faced the fusuma door.

To end this dream, you must open the fusuma door with your own hands. Whether Yoishi's suggestion was right or wrong, I had to do it, I thought. There was no reason to not open it. Why would I be scared of something like a fusuma? Why would I be scared of the presence on the other side of the fusuma? If I don't open this door, I'll keep dreaming this dream for the rest of my life.

"I will end this dream." I tried to persuade myself as I spoke those words. I placed my shaking fingers on the fusuma's handle once again. I concentrated my fingertips on the slight texture of the flat surface. Taking a deep breath, I gradually poured my power into it. As if I was breaking an ancient seal, I poured power into my fingers. There was a slight hint of movement, and the fusuma eventually moved. At that moment, I felt an overwhelming light shining at the back, the sound of something breaking violently. However, that quickly passed by and in front of me, the fusuma opened. However,

--However.

"…..What is this?" Before my eyes, there was no trace of daughter's tidied room from before. Neither the daughter, nor the futon was there. It was like a completely different room. The air pierced my nose; it was a dead room on the verge of collapse that looked like it hadn't been used for a hundred years.

"…What is this place?" My voice shook; I realized the fear hadn't gone away.

"That is….?" In the dark interior of the room, something was there. Something was placed on the alcove at the back of the room. My brain felt completely uneasy about trying to understand what lay there. But I realized, Yoishi had said it: it was something I wasn't supposed to see. However,

I had already opened the fusuma.

I will immediately end this dream. I will return to my normal life. That's right, with all the courage I could muster, I took one step

forward. The sound of the tatami mat bending echoed along with that of a creak similar to that of a person crying. I approached the alcove, and grabbed it.

In the dim light, what stood there was --- an old kokeshi doll.

A kokeshi doll, it had been left there for countless years, without being cleaned by anyone. The brush strokes depicting the soft corner of the eyes, I was about to recall something, when the kokeshi spoke:

“Even after I told you not to open it...”

○

“…Nagi-kun”

I heard a voice. “Get a hold of yourself, Nagi-kun”, it made me feel somewhat better; the moment I realized who it was, I finally woke up.

“Are you alright?” In the darkly lit room, the one shaking me was Krishna-san. “You were making a lot of noise like you were having a nightmare. Sorry I entered your room because of that” Saying that, she opened the curtain. The moon’s light seeped in; Krishna-san’s figure in her fancy sleep-wear became apparent. “Did you have a bad dream?” She said, as she sat down on the bed, slightly putting her hand on my knee, I became flustered and pulled back my knee.

When I think about it, both Krishna-san and Yoishi were supposed to be asleep in the guest rooms in the first floor. My voice echoed from the room in the second floor – How much did I yell to reach that far?

“Don’t worry.” Krishna-san said with a smile, As if reading my mind. “Yoishi and I were in the same room, I woke up because she was grumbling in her sleep.”

It was my first time seeing Krishna-san without glasses. On top of that, she was too cute in those strawberry pajamas. She was reflected in the moonlight with her smooth bobbed hair slightly disheveled. My heart started beating fast, to hide that I took repeated deep breaths.

“Is there anything troubling you?” Krishna-san asked me. That straight gaze was fixed on the inside of my eyes, as if she could see right through me. I nodded, and began to open up bit by bit about everything that had happened until now. I started talking about seeing the same dream recently, about it being a lucid dream, about the large Japanese style mansion as the setting and it being a continuous story. About the family living there, about there being an unreachable room. Yoishi’s recent appearance in the dream, the dream rapidly becoming creepier due to her. However, while in the middle of my talk, I became sour. I know from experience. People's nightmares are not scary to hear. Rather, the more desperately we try to convey that fear, the more the listener will be disillusioned.

“Well, it’s that sort of thing, but – It’s not scary, is it?” Hearing me say that, Krishna-san crossed her legs and looked at me with a serious face.

“No-That is, not really a good tendency.” Hearing that unexpectedly serious tone, I unconsciously sat up straight. “A dream is a chaotic piece of memory randomly constructed from your unconscious mind. And, in that dream, the room you can’t go into is – probably… A thing you unconsciously want to forget, that’s a high probability.”

“I was told something similar by Yoishi”, in my dream of course, I added.

“And yet, why did you open it?”

“…..Eh?”

“People are animals that can forget things they don't want to remember. And that especially goes for humans: who have this rare ability. It's an important factor in keeping a human sane. Digging that up as a joke is just problematic.”

It seemed Krishna-san was implicitly laying the blame at Yoishi.

“I’ll give you one stern warning.” With a strict, straight gaze towards me, Krishna-san spoke.

“Don’t associate with her anymore.”

“No, but it’s a dream—” Krishna-san cut me off quietly:

"Listen, Nagi-kun. I told you before. The spirits try desperately to seek meaning. They seek meaning because their existence is weak."

"Yes, but what does that have to do with my dream….?" "In seeking meaning, many ghosts and Yoishi Mitsurugi are almost the same."

“……”

“Maybe she and you -- no, she and all human beings, are in a different place from the very start. Perhaps she is already in the world beyond while still living. We are standing in this world talking about the world beyond, in comparison: she stands alone in the world beyond while talking about the world beyond. That is exactly why her words are filled with gloom, causing fear and anxiety in the listener.”

That’s right, within the dream, the fear I felt was that I was going to be ‘taken away’ by her. To a place I wouldn’t be able to come back from, I wouldn’t be able to wake up again, I thought I would be dragged to the world on the other side. At that moment, above all else: I feared Yoishi. I was frightened by something that could be glimpsed in her dark eyes.

So that is what is known as the power of the world beyond.

“She seeks meaning in the paranormal. And her reason for seeking it must also have something to do with the other side. It's not a good thing for a living person to start digging into. There are some things people aren’t supposed to know.” With those words, I remembered that forgotten dark room. There was certainly something over there that made me think I didn't want to stay there for even a minute or a second. I scratched my head, and I asked:

“But –what should I do? How do I stop seeing that dream?”

It’s difficult, replied Krishna as she folded her arms. “If you are conscious of a specific dream, it will inevitably be easier to link with -- The best thing is to turn your consciousness towards something else, like a manga or a novel, until you fall asleep naturally.” With

that she looked at me: “But regardless, you too are to blame for seeing the same dream repeatedly.”

“Eh?”

“Didn’t I tell you? You have no tolerance for the occult. In spite of that you’ve ignored my warnings recently. You choose to wander around in the depths of this world by choice. On top of that, doing exactly what a child like Yoishi tells you to do, that’s nothing more than reaping what you sow.”

“T-that’s cruel, please don’t say such coldhearted things.” Without thinking I grabbed Krishna-san’s shoulder, the petite occult site manager jumped in a shock and her cheeks turned flush red.

“A-anyway, as soon as the festival is over, I’ll take responsibility and take Yoishi back to Tokyo, You spend your summer vacation here in your hometown. Your mind and spirit is exhausted from living in Tokyo alone for so long! Got it? Well, Good night!” saying that rapidly like a machine gun, she got up and darted out of the room. For some reason or the other, it seems she realized that she was in a guy’s room late at night, on top of that in her pajamas.

I took a deep breath.

“But, you know...” I gazed at the half-moon from the window. “I was told not to associate with Yoishi ever again but… She’s here until the festival. Even though it’s unpleasant, I’ll end up meeting her somehow”.

To be honest, when I think about it, it’s not Yoishi who I’m afraid of; rather, it’s the words she spits out. For example: What I had been looking at with peace of mind up until now had turning it into something uncomfortable. Making me feel that there was no safe place in this world, that kind of despair. Her words were filled with these kinds of unlucky things.

On the other hand, to call her unpleasant -- I don’t feel that’s the case. She’s a little difficult to approach, and it’s not like I can just call her eccentric or anything.

“Dammit…I don’t know!” Why do I have to be so sleepless about Yoishi? Getting angry at myself with thoughts like that, I got up and left my room. I moved through the dark corridor, passing my sister’s room along the way, going down the stairs to the first floor. I poured myself a cup of water in the kitchen and drank it in one gulp. After idly spending time there for a while, I was about to return to my room, when I realized it…

The second floor, which was added around the time my sister started going to junior high school, had a Western-style structure; the first floor had my parents’ room, the tatami room and the guest room -- Everything was a chain of Japanese style rooms. I think they had been made in such a way to accommodate a large number of guests; however, all of the partitions were fusuma doors.

--You can never open the fusuma.

I recalled the words Yoishi had said in my dream.

“…It can’t be.” Feeling slightly nervous, I proceeded into the corridor, and stood in front of the guest room. Taking one gulp I stretched out my hands, and placed them on the fusuma. I could feel the dry touch on my fingertips. With that, my heart became stronger, and I put all my strength into them. The fusuma opened abruptly. The living room where the party was held the other day spread before my eyes. On the tatami mats, there was a large table, and in the corner, a Buddhist altar. On it, my grandmother and grandfather were smiling peacefully, it was the living room I had been used to since childhood.

“..... That’s right, didn't it always open like this?” Muttering that, I once again moved in the direction of the stairs, once more standing in front of my parents’ room. Taking a gulp, I put my fingers on the fusuma, quietly opening it.

“….It opens. It was just a dream after all, how ridiculous.” as I muttered that triumphantly, in that moment, I realized it.

In that dark room, there was no futon. It was the dead of night, but neither my mother nor father were present. The moonlight shining in from the window was clear and blue. This is, just like the mansion in

the dream, dyed in pale blue everywhere. In that room with no one else, the sound of my heartbeat had started reverberating loudly. There's no way, I muttered.

At that moment, as if being guided by something, my eyes were drawn to the inner part of the room. I noticed a closet was there, and the pattern that was drawn on that fusuma came into view, it was the Kayou pattern…

--You must not open it. --This room belongs to「xxx」, that's why you must absolutely not open it.

Remembering the voice I had heard in the dream – I staggered into the room. I recalled the story Yoishi had spoken of in the dream, about a dream you couldn't wake up from. Things that happen in the dream begin to manifest themselves in reality, is what she said.

"No, it's the other way around." I said as if trying to convince myself. "I had unconsciously seen this pattern here, that's why it appeared in my dream." I said that, standing In front of the design that was exactly the same as the one in the dream.

"That's right, I'm sure of it. That's why I should be able to open this one as well."

Up until now I had opened two fusuma doors. Just like those two, it would be fine to try and open this one as well. But – my hands were shaking. My legs were as well, I couldn't take one more step. Without knowing it, I was sweating. I couldn't get close to the fusuma which was just a few meters ahead of me.

--It'll be fine if I do it tomorrow, I thought. That's right. I shouldn't push myself. It'll be fine if I open it tomorrow when it's daytime.

But, the moment I tried to escape placing my foot at the entrance, I heard a scraping sound behind me. Something cold ran down my back, my legs became petrified.

--What is that sound?

I want to know. But, I don't want to look. I'm not supposed to look.

My heart began to throb violently.

But, my neck was, slowly turning back.

I didn't want to know the true identity of that sound, but as if it was being manipulated, my head turned back.

In the dark interior of the room – The fusuma, was slightly open.

It was just a few centimeters, a gap appeared, from which the jet-black darkness could be seen.

From the other side of the darkness, something was peeking at me.

While listening to my screams from somewhere – my consciousness… disappeared.

5

The sound of bursting fireworks reverberated from the other side of the window. The bright sunlight shone in through the curtains and illuminated the room. I opened my eyes – I was, on my bed. About to fall over at any moment because of my bad sleeping posture, I simply looked up at the ceiling in a daze.

"…Is this, reality?" I couldn't make sense of what was real and what wasn't anymore. Firstly, I'll try to pinch my cheeks. It hurts. I couldn't be convinced with just that, I repeatedly slapped my head. It hurts to a ridiculous extent.

Scratching my hair, I finally let out a deep breath. Standing up, I shifted the window curtains aside and peeked outside. Along the road, I could see many parents and children walking while wearing traditional happi coats[27]. I drew the curtains open fully, and opened the window. The summer breeze blew in, that dense hot air quickly woke me up. From afar, I could hear the sound of laughter and the traditional music. The sunlight was already strong.

I heard the sound of a flute drifting in through the wind from somewhere.

"It's the festival."

The day of the Fujieda three-mountain gods' fire festival had clear weather.

But – The emotional uplift of the festival I was intimate with since childhood had been completely spoiled recently because of the dream I'd been having. How much of a dream was it? I had no idea. If the dream kept itself contained to that residence, then that's well and good. I'm certain of that much. But afterwards, waking up in the middle of the night and speaking to Krishna-san -- was that part of the dream as well? And after that wanting to drink a glass of water

and opening my parents' room, what about that? And finally, I recalled the thing that was peeking from the fusuma, my body shivered. Unconsciously, I hugged myself with both my arms, and fell to the ground for a minute.

"….Something awful is going to happen to me sooner or later, isn't it?"

Or rather, am I going to end up devoured by the dream if this continues?

The moment I began to worry –

"Nagi-suke! How long are you gonna sleep for?!" Suddenly, my sister's voice resounded in from the lower floor, jolting my consciousness to attention. Surprised, I took a glance at the clock at my bedside, it was already past the agreed assembly time of 10'o clock.

"Dammit!" Sloppily combing my disheveled bed hair, I left my room in a rush. Galloping down the corridor, I thundered down the stairs, where I looked into my elder sister's bold eyes on the first floor, my heart suddenly loosened.

"Ah! Sis…"

My spirit, exhausted to its limit because of the nightmares of every day, needed a resting place. There had been a lot of creepy things happening in rapid succession, and I wanted to tell someone about it. I could have told my mother, but I didn't want to worry her, my father wouldn't take me seriously, but when I think about it, I think there is only one reliable relative here.

"Sis, please listen to me". Uttering those words, in the spur of the moment, I extended my arms to try and hug her; instead I received a perfect punch to my stomach.

"Urgh"

"You're slow, Nagi. How long did you sleep for?"

…Ugh. It's painful. I can't breathe. I mean, it really went in there

quite deep.

“Everyone is already heading there, you hear? You’re supposed to carry the portable shrine too, aren’t you? Stop dilly dallying and hurry up then!”

Rattling on and on like that, my sister Akira was already dressed in an indigo dyed Hanten[28]. A thin, narrow towel was bound tightly to her forehead, and black trousers going down to her slender legs. Looking at that figure, even a relative like me is fascinated and filled with vigou – no, it’s beautiful.

“…Sis” I said while holding back the pain in my stomach.

“It really suits you.”

“Ha-?”

I had intended to praise her, but for some reason, she raised her sharp eyebrows and glared at me.

“Why are you saying that at this point? Men have been swarming around me since forever.”

“Eh? Aren’t they your henchme…?”

slap

Without a moment’s delay, I was struck with the towel she was holding.

“You moron! Don’t call them my henchmen. They’re my followers. They’re good-for-nothings whose souls have been robbed by my charm.”

Good-for-nothings -- Isn’t that rating them rather poorly?

As I continued to be befuddled:

“So, you feel like carrying the portable shrine in that get-up?” My elder sisters’ eyes shined with anger.

“No, of course not. Where is my Hanten?”

“It’s in the drawing room, hurry up and get changed.” Ah, as I moved towards the living room, I remembered something and looked back.

“Sis, where are those two?”

“They already left for the mountain temple. Krishna-chan was looking very beautiful in her yukata”.

Well, that’s what I thought, the problem wasn’t with her.

“What about Yoishi? Did she, properly get dressed for the festival?”

My sister just shrugged “That girl is fine with just a school uniform.”

“I see…” I left to change my clothes right away.

It’s finally time I thought, as I pushed my foot through my trousers, I felt really excited about the festival happening. I put on my jika-tabi socks[29], and wore the hanten. Lastly I tied the workman’s apron, that’s everything. I hung the hand towel from my forehead and left the drawing room where my sister scrutinized me.

“….What is it?”

“Well, you look pretty good in it.”

“Right?”

“Oi! Don’t get carried away. Hurry up and let’s go” Right, I answered.

I wore my sandals at the front door and the moment I left, all traces of that ominous dream vanished.

The day of Fujieda’s fire festival: on this day, almost all the shops in the city are closed, instead people all gather around the festival float. They line up in the open air in great numbers, wearing matching happi coats. With the onset of mid-day, they bring down the portable shrine from the mountain shrine and parade it around town for the whole day. Around night time, the portable shrine, imbued with everyone’s wishes of a peaceful life hereafter, is burned in front of

the mountain shrine. Those flames dye Eboshi Mountain in bright red, engulfing the town in a magical glow. That was, what was called the fire festival of the three god's mountain shrine.

The scorching sunlight kept pouring down from high in the sky, the portable shrine was being paraded in the main street. The men wore black work aprons, while the women were wearing deep red ones, and they all cheered in rhythm each time the portable shrine was

raised up in the air. The elderly, the young, men and women, waved traditional fans from the roadside, as they extolled the people holding up the portable shrines. They said their thanks to the portable shrine as the holders danced with it and moved forward. This was the tradition of my town, which has lived in forestry for generations. The carrying pole that was used to hold up the portable shrine, they were made from a warped Japanese cypress called the left cypress found in the deepest forest of Eboshi mountain. The mountain god is said to have passed back and forth there and bended it over on the way through, and is said to be an omen of good luck.

Maru-yan, Ranbashi and the other youngsters of the neighborhood together with me included in the second position as carrier, shouldered the portable shrine together. I took hold of the weight of the carrying poles as it dug into my shoulder, lifted it up, and chanted in unison with the parishioner of the three god mountain shrine. The voices reverberated from the roadside. Matching with the rhythm of the portable shrine, the mountain shrine festival becomes more energetic.

I heard a remarkable shout of encouragement, when I looked it was my elder sister was waving a large traditional Japanese fan. Next to her was Krishna, who wore an indigo-dyed yukata that matched my sister's hanten. They matched each other quite well. Next to her was Pei-chan, wasn’t he clinging a little too much to her? He was grinning while staring at Krishna-san, not even bothering to look my way. My father was already red faced, when the portable shrine passed by him, he looked at me for an instant, but soon someone in the neighborhood association next to him poured him a drink and he turned that way. Next to him was my mother. We made eye contact and she simply smiled. And then -- there was Yoishi. She felt out of place standing there alone wearing a white blouse and black tie; she was gazing intently towards me. In this joyous ceremony, she alone was intently wearing an ominous face. But I courageously raised my voice so much that I didn't care about that. “Youseiya. Seiya. Yosseiya” I chanted, as if I was driving away the dream I couldn’t wake up from, as if I was dispelling every part of me that was clinging to her, I raised the portable shrine. The trees used to build this portable shrine were a gift from the mountain god. They are tempered thoroughly in difficult environments for many long years,

finally coming of age. They are then cut down and used for lumber. Afterwards, with the skill and knowledge of the craftsman used, they become our shield from wind and rain. We had been repeating this long tradition since the time of our ancestos. And will continue here forth, as well. We thank the mountains that rise above the earth, thank our ancestors, and pray for sound health in the future. We give thanks for being brought to life.

I entrusted the portable shrine to the next carrier “Ahh, it’s a good festival”. Said Krishna-san who finally came around, drinking the sacred wine she was supplied with.

“Having fun is the most important thing, after all.”

“But, they’re going to be burning that portable shrine from here on, right? That’s just a waste.” Krishna-san muttered, as she fanned me with a traditional Japanese fan.

“That’s right. Six months ago, the youth association and the parishioners of the mountain shrine did their best to make it.” I nodded while dripping with sweat; I wiped my neck with a towel. The time had already around five in the evening; the setting sun dyed the mountains in red. The portable shrine, which had finished its fourth round around, would soon be heading towards the front of the mountain shrine. There the tree has to be returned back to the mountain god, where it would be burned in a grand fire.

“At that time, the lights in the downtown will be turned off with only the light of the iron basket fire remaining, that is the climax. Because it gets so exciting, a lot of couples adhere to this festival.”

“I see. Literally what you call: smokes of love.”

Seeing Krishna-san being reflected in the evening sun like that, I suddenly got curious.

“Krishna-san, do you have a boyfriend?” “……Eh?”

“Well, I asked if you have a boyfriend.” When I did so, Krishna-san’s face dyed redder then the evening sun.

“D-don’t say stupid things! It’s obvious I don’t have one!”

“Well, it’s not so obvious, is it? You’re already twenty, having one or two boyfriends is obvio-..”

“It’s not like that. I’ve never had any. In the first place, I don’t have time to do things like that. There are still many things I want to learn, so many books I want to read. You know the story about with the gardener who fell in love with the emperor's wife?" "If that's how you want to put it, there's also a story about Confucius who tripped when posed with a love problem." I retorted immediately, demonstrating my knowledge of Japanese literature I had recently gained while studying for my exams.

“If you say that, then love is darkness [30], I’m busy with a different type of darkness.” We were both playing such a type of word game, when:

“Do you dislike long distance relationships?” Pei-chan butted in. “Dance with me in the main stage of the fire festival.”

“Ah… There is a dance?”

Laughing at a flustered Krishna-san, I nodded. “It’s like the dance at the Bon festival. It’s fine if you take it easy and match to the rhythm.”

“I’m in trouble then, it’s like I have no sense for music at all. I’m bad at things like Karaoke.”

Karaoke and a Bon dance are pretty different things, I thought, but seeing Krishna-san this flustered was funny, so I didn’t say it out loud.

“Anyway, I’ve fallen in love with you at first sight, Krishna-san. Please go out with me!” Pei-chan ignored my shocked stare as he lowered his head, at that moment:

“Don’t make me laugh.” Maru-yan barged in the conversation. “I was looking for you all over and here you were; it looks like I made it in time. Krishna-san, this guy is known as the number one playboy in all of Fujieda. If you wish to go out with a young man, then please go out with m—”

“Don’t get in the way, Maru-yan. I haven’t even received a reply yet,

that's unfair!"

"Shut up, you were trying to get a head start, you bastard…"

If Maru-yan or Pei-chan alone were gunning for Krishna-san, I would have had to try and protect her a little, but if the two of them were gunning for her at the same time, they would keep each other in check and it would probably turn out fine.

Anyway, what happened with Yoishi? I looked around restlessly and from a distance, recognized Ranbashi's tall and thin figure walking vacantly.

"Hey, you happen to know where Yoishi went off to?" Ranbashi shook his head in silence and murmured something.

"What? I couldn't hear you"

"I was given the cold shoulder."

"…Huh?"

"I said good evening to her and tried to speak but --- she ignored me and went in the direction of the mountain shrine."

His tall figure drooped down so low looked comical; I tried frantically not to laugh and asked him in return:

"Being given the cold shoulder? She probably didn't hear you, that's all."

"No, she looked at me once so she should have heard me. Tokyo high school girls really are stubborn." Ranbashi sighed deeply.

I ran off immediately to look for Yoishi at the mountain shrine. The crowd was overflowing in comparison with the afternoon; I couldn't run anymore around the area of the Torii gate. Yellow peach-like lights were hung as if to guide people towards the mountain shrine, stalls lined up on both sides drew the attention of the people dressed in yukatas. Trying to weave in between them and moving ahead, I looked for Yoishi. But even when I managed to arrive at the mountain shrine, Yoishi was nowhere to be seen.

--After that, I went up the road approaching the shrine and was around the main shrine when, I heard a long and loud cheer behind me. It seems as if the portable shrine had arrived. The sounds of the cheers were echoing from a distance, I was pushed along with the flow of the crowd heading in that direction. Including the people from the neighborhood town, a large number of tourists might have been mixed in together. Out of all the times I had experienced this festival, this was the biggest crowd I had seen. Countless number of colored Yukata's piled up – all chanting "Youseiya. Seiya. Yosseia." However, within that crowd, was a face I thought I knew. I couldn't immediately recognize who it was. Was it an acquaintance from my high school days? Or was it an acquaintance from much further back. Flickering figures of people, blending together, in that far away distance, that person once again appeared. When I saw that hair style, my heart rang out. It couldn't be, I gulped. I pushed away the person in front of me as I ran. I chased after that person with all my might. "Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseia." In between the echoes of those resounding voices, I ran with desperation. A richly colored phoenix enshrined on top of the portable shrine, shines brightly, dances above the crowds. Dissipating fireworks dye the sky. In the illumination of the dropping sparks, I saw it. It was a woman in a yukata with a dyed pattern of gold on a white background. Her long hair carefully tied up, lips softly pursed. And, next to that girl…two boys accompanied her. The two were speaking alternatively to attract the girl's attention. I was convinced with the way they were paying attention to her.

"Why…is the girl from the mansion in this place?" I chased them desperately, but even though the three did not seem to be in a hurry, they gradually moved away from me. They were supposed to exist only in my dream. Or could it be that I had already seen them somewhere else? Was that the reason? Was that why they appeared in my dream? Moreover, I realized it. The person accompanying behind those three, was the head of the household, wearing a dark face. Behind him was that familiar long and black hair.

"Hey Yoishi, is that you? Why are you…?"

However, the five people seemed detached... They walked through the crowd as if they were illusions mixed in from another other

world. Their figures becoming increasingly smaller.

“Wait! Wait a second!” I shouted.

“Oh, Nagito”. Someone grabbed my shoulders. When I turned around, my father was there laughing gleefully.

“You did well in carrying the portable shrine. Here, have a drink”
“Hey, let go of me, old man.” I replied, my father’s strength knew no limit when he got drunk. Dammit, in this situation, all I can do is find someone drunk to mingle with him. Isn’t there an acquaintance of my father’s here somewhere, I looked around, and there was my sister, looking even more red faced.

“Oh, so here you were” My sister came close to me saying that line, and without a moment’s delay, put me in a headlock. Even though she’s my sister, she looked pretty glamorous. My right cheek was tightly locked against her breast.

“It’s so much fun, the festival, isn’t it?”

“H-hey, stop it already sis. Let go already sis!”

“Say, Nagi. You think the same, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I think so but, there’s someone I have gotta go afte-“

“It’s fine.” My elder sis said that while still holding me firmly down under her armpit. “Just stay here.”

“…Huh?”

“Just stay here and don’t go back to Tokyo. That would be what’s best for you.”

“Stay here? What about my university?”

“University? I was against it, wasn’t I? You have everything here. Nature, people who care about you, the mountain god will protect you. That’s right; you just marry that Krishna-san, and live here. That girl will make a good wife for you. She’s the type who can easily give

birth, I guarantee it."

In terms of disposition, well, I agree, but --- isn't that jumping too far ahead? The moment I thought I would say that out loud. My sister's voice changed to a lowered one, as if reverberating from beneath the surface.

"But that other girl is no good, she can't stay here."

Hearing that shuddering voice like a man's, my feet hardened. "Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya." The reverberating chants of the fire festival echoed in my ears, as if they were heard from another world, as if they were faint ripples of waves. I felt the color in my vision quickly fading away.

"Sis, let go of me! Seriously!" I meant to shout that out. But, my voice wouldn't come out. Breathing – was hard. Around me, the air was disappearing. As if I had dived into the depth of the ocean, the oxygen was depleting --- and, all that was left inside me was absolute fear in its primordial state. When I was a kid, I had tasted this feeling of despair too many times.

"Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya". The festival was coming to a boil. Crowds of people were pushing up towards the mountain shrine.

"Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya". "Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya". "Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya".

As if a Buddhist prayer was being chanted, it echoed all around me, and within those shouts:

"S-stop it!" With my full strength put into it, I wrestled free of my sister's arm. Clutching my throat like that, I ran. My breathing – I couldn't breathe well. Was it because I was feeling shaken? My asthma attacks had completely returned.

In a world that was rapidly deteriorating, I kept running. I desperately kept running, even though I was bumping into people. Even as my tears welled up, I kept coughing violently. However, the fresh air was not reaching my lungs in the least.

--Mother...

In a soundless voice, I shouted.

--Help me, mother.

That's right. If that hand would rub my back, everything would turn out fine. These asthma attacks would always settle down with that.

--Where is she? Where is my mother?

Everything was hazy. Only the flames of the iron basket fire danced and flickered, as if they guided me. Black, red, white and yellow. In this hazy world, only that light flickered. It would take fifteen minutes to run to my house from the mountain shrine. On top of that, it's not guaranteed that my mother will be at home, because it was the middle of the festival. Moreover, when I can't see the landscape in this situation, how am I supposed to find my way to her?

--Nagito. In that instant, I thought I heard my mother's voice, I shouted back in response. However, that voice too, was drowned out in the hustle and bustle of the festival. Youseiya. Nagito. Nag-- Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya. --to. Nagito. Youseiya. Seiseiya. Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya. –to. Nag—Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya. Nagito. Youseiya. Seiseiya. Youseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya.

"Mother, mother, mother!"

Within those repeated chants, I shouted in reply, I ran. I kept running. Dammit, move. Please get out of the way. I can't breathe anymore. I'm -- going to end up dead. My legs got tangled, I was about to lose my balance and fall into the crowd when – I tumbled into the place that abruptly opened. It was subdued in darkness.

No—

In that place, there was no surface, just a floating piece of ground that continued to disappear --

In that murky, unending darkness, I was swallowed whole.

○

There was a quiet sound of the fusuma opening. Someone drew near, as if to hug my head, they embraced me. I rested my head on that person's lap, and, I felt a warm hand touching my back, as if stroking it, as if massaging it, that warm hand kept going back and forth across. Before I knew it, I could breathe once again. I continued breathing with comfort. As I kept breathing, my heart calmed down.

I slowly raised my head.

With soft narrowed eyes, my mother was looking at me. Unawares, I had managed to make it back home. I was in my mother's familiar room, and found myself lying on my mother's lap, using it as a pillow. "Did your cough settle down?"

Being spoken to in such a kind voice –

It was a pretty pathetic thing for an eighteen year old but, my tears almost spilled over.

"Mother, I, I was –"

"Yes?"

I was always into strange and mysterious stories. I also had an interest in scary stories. I was frequenting an occult site. I really loved that creepy feeling and that world where common sense didn't apply. And I only planned on enjoying that world from the outside. But, before I realized – I had crossed a line. If you take a peek, you end up being seen from the other side as well. I thought I knew that. But before I knew it, my feet had already stepped into Ikaigabuchi. I had crossed a distinct line that separates the dead and the living.

"Hey, mother."

I thought –

"'I've been a weirdo for a long time." At last, I spat out those words.

"….I, I was, In Tokyo, the first house I lived in, I realized I was not in

control of myself. I was possessed by something; I later realized that as if it was someone else's problem. Nevertheless, even after I was told not to go, I went to an abandoned hospital. I suffered through much more eerie things when I was there. Even if I talked about them, you wouldn't believe the dreadful things I suffered through. However, thanks to the help of various people, I was able to survive. I was safely able to return back. But, I'm – once again, being drawn to somewhere. Towards that darkness -- towards something present in that darkness. I don't know what that thing is. In that terrible dream I was dreaming for so long, I'm being drawn to something inside that fusuma. I can't stop myself. I can hear the voice in my head telling me to stop. But, I think I want to try and sink in. I want to try and entrust my body to it. When I try and tell myself not to go, I still end up going. Why is that? I don't know."

In the middle of the conversation, my knees began to tremble, I stuttered between words. But my mother, without rushing me, just listened silently. Sometimes, my breathing became difficult but, I felt like I couldn't escape this suffering unless I spat it out, so I fervently continued speaking. All the doubts I had been holding about myself for so long, I confessed them all to my mother.

"No matter what I do, I end up going along with my heart's desire to see that something present on the other side. Does that mean, In short, that I'm already swallowed by the darkness?"

That must mean –

I'm already --

"I'm broken, right?"

I spat out the dark and sinister thoughts that had been wriggling inside me for a long time, I knew that admitting them would destroy my core identity as a human being. But, I felt I couldn't move forward if I kept fooling myself any longer. I feel like I'm going around in circles unless I admit that I'm scared of that possibility – Like Yoishi always did – I spat everything out.

After the long conversation was over, every part of my body was so weak that nothing even mattered anymore. Only the dim light

provided comfort, and my back continued to be massaged, I wanted to sink into the darkness, I thought. “I thought it was about time.” Suddenly, my mother spoke in a whisper.

“I knew that someday, a time would come where you would choose to walk your own path.” Not knowing the meaning, my startled body rose up.

For who knows how long, sitting next to me, was Yoishi Mitsurugi. Dark eyes, filled with a seemingly sad light, fixedly stared at me.

“W-why…are you?”

The embarrassment of being seen with tearful eyes as I made feeble complaints to my mother, quickly changed to anger. This is my place. It's the only place where I can recover as myself.

I moved my body, as if to signal her to get out, at that moment—

“That young lady is not a bad girl”. My mother’s silent whisper echoed in the room.

“She can surely exorcise your darkness.”

“--Eh?”

“From here on, Listen to her words carefully, and see things properly with your own eyes.”

Yoishi just sat there in silence, I objected.

“Her? No mother, you probably don’t know, but, this girl has a psychic power. With her, she might suddenly receive some strange message, in other words, she has no interest other than horror stories, she doesn’t take baths, she can’t read the atmosphere, she vomits everywhere-“

“Nagito, that’s not it”. My mother shook her head, and whispered once more. “That’s not it.”

“Only those who know the darkness know the value of the light.”

With those words, my mother... disappeared from sight.

After that, only the silence and the dark remained. My house was illuminated solely by the light of the pale blue moon. My parents' room: There are still signs of my mother here and there, but this was a room with only me and Yoishi present.

"I—"

With that hoarse voice, I collapsed onto the frayed tatami mat. Why am I here? Where did my mother go to, she was just here… The festival – my father, my sister, Krishna-san, Maru-yan, Pei-chan, Ranbashi, where was everyone? I didn't understand anything anymore. I couldn't grasp hold of the situation. I didn't know where I was standing. What is a dream? What is reality? I didn't know anymore. Information was all mixed up in a jumble inside my head.

"No…."

Lying in the corner of my head, I found that cold 'answer'. If I were to explain everything with a simple answer, I had already found it.

--I'm broken.

For a long time, I had already --been broken, from the start. Otherwise, there was no way to explain the phenomenon that had occurred so far.

"The act of giving meaning to the the thoughts of the dead in the reality in front of you is what is called a curse." Yoishi spoke under the moonlight.

"In other words, a phenomenon in which you can think and move in only a single direction. That is to say, a very strong and firm curse has been placed upon you."

--A curse?

"But – given that there is no malice there, I don't know what to do. "

Malice? A curse? Ridiculous. She is trying to confuse me again. It shook the roots of my heart. Just hearing her words is enough to

cause anxiety. She is trying to drag me down again somewhere.

“Listen to her words carefully from here on, and see things properly from now on with your own eyes.”

But, my mother’s words from a few moments ago were still ringing in my ears.

“What should I do?” I asked in a shivering voice. “Yoishi… what should I do?”

“To put it simply, open it.” The place Yoishi was pointing to, it was the Kayou patterned fusuma.

“That fusuma, when it’s opened by your own hand, everything will be over.”

But that moment, I heard the sound of footsteps from the hall.

“Nagi-suke!” The voice rang out. When I turned around, there was my sister, wearing her hanten dress. Behind her, was Krishna-san who was out of breath, my father and Maru-yan. Pei-chan and Ranbashi rushed in in soon after.

“Everyone….”

As I rose to my feet, my sister at the head shouted. “You idiot, Where did you go in the middle of the festival?!”

“No, I was…”

“Didn’t I tell you not to associate with Yoishi” Wearing a yukata, Krishna-san’s cheeks were swelled up. At the same time, everyone started speaking to me all at once. I had been possessed by the evil mountain god, according to my father. This festival is to save your spirit, said my sister. If I’m going to have a wife, it’s definitely going to Kurimoto-san, said Maru-yan. That girl is so pretty, said Ranbashi as he stared at Yoishi. Look, the portable shrine is coming, said Pei-chan as he laughed. “Seiseiya, yosseiya”, and then I heard the music from the festival. It was getting closer. I knew the portable shrine was coming close to my home. I was in a daze, just standing there and looking at everyone as the sounds piled on each other.

“It’s alright.” Yoishi whispered slightly. “They can never enter this room.” With those words, I realized that neither my sister, nor the others had stepped foot into the room. And with Yoishi speaking those words, they were all thrown into disarray at once, shouting something incomprehensible. I registered their words simply as noise; I couldn’t understand what they were saying. But, in this dim and hazy world, my nose smelled something. When I looked, I could see shadows swaying behind the sliding door, an orange light flickered.

“Hey, this house, it’s burni—“I was cut short when I saw it, in the direction of the hall. There was something fallen behind Ranbashi. It was a yukata with a white background. The center of the yukata was stained dark red. It was the daughter from that residence, completely motionless. Her stomach was split open, her entrails strewn all over. As if they were fighting over the spilled entrails next to her, the two cousins also lay there. Likewise, their navy blue yukatas were completely drenched. The two had stabbed each other with a sharp knife, dying together. A little further away, the lord of the mansion was also collapsed. His neck was lurched in a strange way. In my burning house, dead bodies and the festival manifested at the same time.

“It’s alright.” Spoke Krishna-san. “This is a mistake. They ended up mixed in this. That’s why they’re dead. But the next time you go to the mansion, the original outcome will be waiting for you.”

That kind of impossible to understand thing, was spoken from that usually logical tone of voice.

“The amalgamation has already begun.” Yoishi spoke.

“It is no longer consistent.” I dumbfoundedly looked over to Yoishi, who muttered while kneeling down. “If this were the real mountain festival, the torii should have been turned in the direction of south east in order to return what you received.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The iron basket fire should not have moved. That night, I told you that the iron basket fire of the mountain gods’ shrine had moved.”

“…What does that mean?”

“The fine details of the dream come from the limits of the dreamer's memory.”

“If someone from outside the dream influences it, it will change. If you pull it, it will come towards you. If you push it, it will pull you. If you shake it, it will shake.

…In short, what is it? What do you wanna say?

“I only wanted to try and press the point you were not confident about. That’s why: the iron basket fire moved.”

“Like I said already, that is—“

What did it mean?

Those words didn’t come out of my mouth. I already understood. I realized what Yoishi was trying to say. However, I was too afraid to accept the truth -- it would destroy everything.

“The curse that has been cast upon you – What should it be called? I don’t know the answer.” Yoishi whispered in a somewhat sad tone.

“But-“

“What lies behind the fusuma is not what you would call a mother.”

Something streamed along my cheek. I slowly wiped it with my hand and found it to be tears. Before I knew it, I had begun to stagger my way to Yoishi’s side. In my back, my father and the others shouted at me to stop. But, I slowly neared the fusuma in the back. Pushing my way through the frayed tatami, I stood in front of the Kayou-patterned fusuma, which stood solemnly in the darkness.

I extended my hand, placed my fingers on the fusuma – in the same breath, I opened it.

“…..It can’t be.”

On the other side of the fusuma I had thrown open, was the kokeshi

doll I had seen in the dream. With soft, narrow eyes, an antiquated kokeshi. The kokeshi was clad in some kind of cloth.

Dragging my shivering legs, I neared the kokeshi, I grabbed the cloth.

"….It can't be" I felt that voice didn't belong to me. I thought I heard it from a tear in the corner of the world somewhere.

That cloth was –

The red cardigan I had given to my mother.

"You've been speaking alone in front of this fusuma for a long time." Whispered Yoishi, who was suddenly standing by my side. "—saying mother, mother. That -- is the true face of the curse that has been cast upon you." I heard a crack, the sound of the whole mansion grating. It sounded like the whole world was being squeezed from the outside.

"Nagi-suke! it's all a lie. Don't be fooled!" When I look back, my sister was outside the room extending her hand towards me. My father just smiled with wrinkles on the corners of his eyes, Maru-yan waved. Pei-chan and Ranbashi both laughed as if they were having fun, at the center, the petite Krishna-san extended her hand and yelled at Yoishi not to take me away. My hometown was there. Fujieda's dense greenery came into view. The warm sun blazed down and the wind blew past my side. It was just like before, the peaceful hometown where I lived. Behind them, it was very bright. In contrast, there was only darkness behind me. There was only a dark colored girl besides me.

"You must choose." Yoishi, said as she took my hand. "A world of comfort… or a world filled with pain."

Don't mess with me, what do I choose?

I shook my hand off as I shouted at Yoishi. But, no words came out of my mouth. Isn't it obvious that it would be better to live in comfort? I've had enough of creepy worlds. I don't have the resistance for it anymore. That's right, unnoticed, I had started dreaming again. If I return to that side, I'd be able to return to my every-day life. What happened to the festival? It should still be halfway through. I had

become exhausted from various things, and ended up in this dream.

But, as I stepped towards the bright world, I met eyes with the person standing furthest back, my mother who stood with a reserved manner. She loosened her cheeks slightly, and showed me a smile of contentment. With everyone desperately stretching out their hands out towards me, I had a strange sensation. Seeing me stop my legs:

“Hurry up and come here, Nagi-kun!” Krishna-san held out her hand again.

“Nagi-suke, you idiot, hurry up and get over here.” Shouted my sister.

“Your mother is here, right? What are you hesitating for?!” My father turned red in anger.

“Tokyo is impossible for you.” Maru-yan laughed as he tried to make fun of me.

“Bring Kurimoto back home with you.” Pei-chan waved with both hands, Ranbashi just kept staring at Yoishi, spellbound.

“Everyone…” With a hoarse voice, I struggled towards the edge of the room.

“Everyone, help me.” As I spoke that out loud, I was hugged tightly. Was it my sister, my father, or my mother, I didn’t know. But, I was in the midst of peaceful warmth. I am blessed. I am loved. I can live here in peace without any discomfort.

“That’s right.”

“This place suits you.”

“You made a mistake going to Tokyo.”

“Well then, let’s go to the festival.”

“That’s right, isn’t it the climax from here on?”

“Let’s make some noise with everyone.”

“Return back to how you were before.”

“Come back, Nagito.”

“Nagito.”

“Nagito.”

-Nagito.

A great many voices chanted in unison close to my ear. Each one of them accepted me. I could live with peace of mind here. If I were to ever fall down, there would be someone to pick me up. If there were fun times, there would be people who would be happy with me; if there were sad times, there would be people who would share in my grief. I would be a part of that, the me that would exist there would be the true me.

--Come here.

Amidst the many overlapping voices, I managed to squeeze out my voice.

“Ah, I’m coming. I’m going over to that side. But, Yoishi, as well—“

---She is not allowed. With that voice, I raised my head in surprise.

“…Why?”

---She will destroy this place, that’s why.

--She will destroy this peaceful world.

“Why… would she destroy it?”

-xxxxx

…What is it?

-xxxxxx

“…Can’t you answer?”

With my face becoming soggy with snot and tears, I spoke out.

“Then, I’ll say it.” I felt a shiver as my surroundings moved.

“That is --- she -- it’s because she doesn’t deceive. She has no restraints, nor taboos. She has no connection to god or devil. She’s never able to read the situation; no matter how inconvenient the truth is, she never runs from it, but instead, digs it up and exposes it.”

With those words, the grating noise of the world throbbed violently like a storm, banging in my eardrums. I couldn’t discern anybody’s voice anymore; their voices were mixed in with the chants of the festival.

“Seiya. Seiya. Yosseiya. Seiseiya. Yosseiya-” As I hummed along with the noises, I remembered.

The fire festival was—

A festival of purification.

To return everything to its original state.

--Nagito.

I didn’t know whose voice it was anymore, a profusely impatient voice struck my ear—

--Don’t get swallowed up by the nightmare.

--Hurry up and come back to the fire festival.

With those words, I replied: “No”, and walked away from there.

“Everything was in reverse.”

Without wiping away the tears, I spat it out:

“You guys – are just a dream.”

6

An innumerable bundle of light kept rotating. It became a spiral, then scattered, winding round and round as it made up the world. Finally, the light slowly came to a stop – forming the brand new wallpaper on the ceiling as I regained consciousness.

I realized it was the apartment I was paying fifty thousand yen in rent for, in Musashino. The blurred world gradually regained its features, and it was Krishna-san who first caught my sight.

“Are you awake, Nagi-kun?”

I took a long, deep sigh of relief; I knew I had survived an unfathomable abyss.

“You’ve been asleep, for three whole days.” With those words, I realized there was someone standing next to Krishna-san.

“…You idiot” It was my sister Akira, sobbing.

“I was contacted by Kurimoto-san, how dare you make me waste my paid vacation?” She blasted at me with her eyes filled with tears. Behind Krishna-san and my sister was Karasu-san. Next to her, was the Buddhist priest I knew from before and a stranger dressed in a kimono with a hakana. In my faint consciousness, I wondered if my apartment was over capacity.

“Everything is thanks to her, be grateful.” Krishna-san pointed at Yoishi Mitsurugi. But she was right next to me with her eyes closed as if she were dead. Her pale, transparent skin, had no trace of blood. She really looked like she was dead.

“She was the one who told us you wouldn’t wake up.”

According to her, Yoishi had once again come to my house around midnight. Why she did so, voluntarily, is because she realized that

something abnormal had happened to me. She quickly contacted Krishna-san, came up with something, and was found sleeping next to my side ever since.

“If a catalyst with a strong disposition like hers didn’t intervene in your dream, you likely would never have waken up.”

I began to understand my situation with Krishna-san’s words. I had been dreaming. I had been seeing a dream within that dream, and I was struggling desperately to wake up from that dream, And in order to end that dream, I was almost engulfed by the dream.

However, I still wasn’t convinced.

“Is this really... reality?”

The petite occult site manager slowly shook her head.

“I can’t guarantee that. Dreams are scary. They are tied deeply to human consciousness. In short, when you dive into the world of the deep subconscious, it’s basically impossible to conclude if it’s a dream or not. That’s why, lucid dreams are so rare. ”

I reeled in the threads of my hazy consciousness, and looked towards my sister.

“Sis..”

“…Yeah?”

“Mother is...—“

“…What about mother?”

“—I…killed her.”

As I spoke those words, the broken fragments of that dream became whole again.

“That’s, not true.”

“But…”

“That’s not true. That’s not what happened, Nagi.” My sister spoke as she took hold of my lying figure.

“You were convinced about that for a long time. Always blaming yourself – That’s why this happened.”

My sister told me everything:

When I was eight years old – my asthma wasn’t just infantile asthma, but Antitrypsin Deficiency, a disease that requires an early healthy lung transplant. For that sake, my mother who was the same blood type, was recommended to transplant part of her lung. But, my mother who already had thin blood vessels around her heart, couldn’t withstand the operation. The transplant was a success, but my mother didn’t return.

“After the operation, you cried and cried, asking where mother went. I ended up saying it to you – mother is inside the fusuma.”

“…….”

“From here onwards, she will stay inside the fusuma but, she’s always by your side.”

--Ah.

If you hear it from someone, you would probably laugh it off as a silly story. But, at this moment, I began to recall the scene I had forgotten up until this point. That is: one evening, our living room was dyed in orange. I was in primary school, crying alone in my mother’s room. My sister came and hugged me tight.

--You can’t open this fusuma. My sister surely said that.

-If you open it, mother will die.

That lie, spoken in desperation by my twelve year old sister: saved the balance of my heart from collapsing. And, the rupture in my heart was stopped in a distorted way. My mother… wasn’t dead. She just couldn’t come out from the fusuma.

--That kind of warped understanding quickly took root in me and

hardened. When I returned from school, I would stand in front of the fusuma and say my greetings. I spoke about what happened with me throughout the day to the fusuma. If anything troubled me, I would discuss it with the fusuma. And, I would be looked at in a sad way by my father and sister. But, that sad gaze, I interpreted it as it being my fault that my mother would not emerge from the fusuma. Eventually, I stopped caring about that gaze, and continued to talk together with the fusuma, freely and openly –We lived that kind of warped daily life, and now is the first time I feel how messed up it all was.

“Nagi-kun” Krishna-san peered into my eyes as she spoke.

“That’s what a person’s death is. It takes time to comprehend it. It took you ten years, but, there are still people who can’t accept it throughout their whole lives. And – that is a form of ghosts.”

Ghosts-

I was drawn to them, I chased them, and I involved myself with them -- the weak existence called ghosts.

It had all been a waste. That -- had already been present inside me, since long ago. Nestled close to my broken heart, it helped me.

“That’s right.” Krishna-san nodded kindly. “Even thought it might be called a curse from its start, it never had any malice.”

Tears spilled down from my sister's big eyes as Krishna-san said that.

--There was never any malice?

Those words seemed to sink into my brain, when I suddenly remembered. I quickly got up.

“What about Yoishi? When is she gonna wake up?” I asked that as Krishna-san quietly looked towards the man in the back. An effeminate man dressed in a blue dyed kinagashi[31]. He shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant way. That detached manner made me remember. This guy… isn’t this bastard the one who Krishna-san called her master? He chanted ‘Out’ to me that one time I was in agony.

“Hey, don’t mess with me. Are you trying to save face like that as Krishna-san’s master?”

I stood up, and drew near to that guy.

“Nagi-kun, stop” Krishna-san stopped me in my tracks, but I didn’t completely settle down.

“So in short, Yoishi entered my dream to try and save me, right?” As I tried to get a confirmation, the man broadly grinned and nodded.

“Then it’s simple. You do as I say. Return me to that dream one more time. Take me to the place where she is. From there on, I’ll go and bring her back.”

“Hey now, don’t make unreasonable requests.” The man raised both his hands in an exaggerated pose as if giving up. “Do you even know what it means to link a person’s self-consciousness to a dream? Common sense doesn’t apply there. People can only ‘think’ when they know where they are standing. If it’s a normal person, it will be difficult for them to preserve their sanity, right? Besides that, you have already been made aware that the dream is a distortion. By now, your brain should be working on the restoration in a hurry. It’s basically impossible to find your way to the same place, and even if you were to do that, it would be recognized as a distortion once more, and the probability of you ever waking up again will be slim to none.”

“Then, what is going to happen to Yoishi? Is she just going to continue sleeping like this?” I yelled as my saliva went flying, Krishna-san took over.

“Listen to me, Nagi-kun. No matter how strong a catalyst is, it's usually impossible to establish your ego when linking to a person's dream. But she was able to do it. Due to the fact that she was able to do it, albeit with some luck, I was able to confirm to some extent, about the essence of the girl named Yoishi Mitsurugi.”

“Confirm? What do you mean?

“Perhaps we and she, the places we stand are distinctly different.”

Those words, made me feel déjà vu. Right, I had heard those words used somewhere before –

“What did Yoishi Mitsurugi lose? What was the cause that made her that way? I don’t know the reason. But she already stands in the world beyond. Alive in the physical sense, but dead in the spiritual sense, an existence synonymous to that of many ghosts."

--Yoishi, is not a living person.

The absurd rumors that were circulating on the internet, I recalled them.

“In other words, we are standing in the living world while talking about the world beyond, in comparison: she stubbornly, talks about the world beyond while in the world beyond. That’s why --her words shake us, who live in this world. That is wh--”

“Her words are filled with gloom, causing fear and anxiety in the listener, right?”

As I whispered that, Krishna-san stared at me in wonder. That’s right – I remembered.

I had definitely heard these words in my dream. That was – the moment I woke up in the blue room in the mansion. Krishna-san who had come to check up on my state had said the same words.

“The same lines were said to me in the dream by Krishna-san. And at that moment, I…I thought Yoishi had dragged me down into that creepy world. Because of her, the situation was headed in a worse direction. And…”

I waved my hands in a panic to Krishna-san who was speechless.

“No, it’s like I’m blaming you or anything. The Krishna-san in my dream that spoke those words was an illusion created by my weak heart. It’s just…I was really cold to Yoishi since she had come into my dream. At the end, I even became convinced that she was some sort of monster. Up until I was admonished by my mother, I really wondered whether Yoishi was some kind of monster, like the rumors on the net had said.”

But – That's not it. If what that kinagashi wearing bastard said is true, she took an absurd risk when she arrived in my sub-conscious. Without knowing if she could make it back in safety, she walked with me together in my twisted world.

Why was that? Why did she do that for me?

"I have to find out why that was. Why did she do such a dangerous thing for me? I need to ask her directly."

I spoke that with utmost seriousness, but…

"You don't know why?" With a sharp glare, Krishna-san clicked her tongue. "Young men really are hopeless, insensitive creatures. I've had enough then; I'll say it in place of her. Why, did Yoishi Mitsurugi save you? It's because you didn't throw away that notebook until the very end!"

"…Huh?"

"You are essentially worthless, a foolish, unprincipled, weak willed, hopeless idiot. And yet, for some reason you still continue to thrust yourself into the paranormal, even sympathizing with the suffering of the dead. After sympathizing, you tried to walk together with it. You absolute moron! But that's not something just anyone can do. A fool you may be, however, as a human that is a valuable quality, like that of a jewel. And a girl is extremely weak for that sort of thing."

"……..Ehhhh?"

"That girl, she helped you with super-logical methods so many times. Without even being a specialist on the occult, she spread those dangerous self-responsibility-type ghost stories in this world to try and save you. Why does she, who is extremely detached with life, take such actions only for you? --- Understand that much, you fool!"

"N…now, wait a second."

I—wasn't that kind of outstanding human. I was just an indecisive, illogical, warped asshole. In the past, I suffered to the point I thought I was gonna die, that's why I ended up having sympathy for that boy from the notebook. I just knew that the pain would be lessened tens

of thousands of times just by having someone by my side.

“I understand that, but as a human being, your respect-worthy nature is a double-edged sword. If you continue doing things like this, you’ll only have a few more years left to live.”

“….Eh?”

“I once told you that you were not suitable for having an interest in the occult, but I said that out of utmost concern for your nature. As long as you have that nature, you will continue to be involved in the affairs of the other side. And no matter how much you try to stay in this world, you will be dragged to the other side, whether you want to or not. That's why I kept telling you not to get involved with Yoishi, that's what it means to confront a girl standing in the world beyond.”

At long last Krishna-san stopped to catch her breath, and took a big gulp of tea from the plastic bottle next to her, draining it, and turned around to face me once again.

“But are you still resolved to get involved with her?”

“……..”

“To save a girl like her, a half-hearted resolve won’t do. If you do things half-heartedly, both of you will end up destroyed. You must step forward, and confront her with the determination of putting your whole life to it. If you do that, a miracle might happen.”

“Wait a minute, Kurimoto-san.” Behind Krishna-san, the kinagashi wearing man shrugged his shoulders. “Shouldn’t you be stopping him?”

“I know it already! But I’m sorry, it’s useless! It’s like I’m not even here! Since I’ve met him, Nagi-kun has never listened to what I said.”

…Stop, it’s painful to be talked about like that by such a tearful face, but, as I continued to be heaped upon by Krishna-san’s passionate criticism – I kept thinking about only one thing in the back of my head. That is, the words I yelled just before I woke up from the dream. Yoishi doesn’t run from reality -- I was able to get out of there

by saying those words to some strange thing that tried to confine me in a dream world.

“In the first place, it’s harsh to think that she doesn’t want to return to this world", the kinazashi man whispered as if he were humming a song. As usual he was acting as if it were someone else’s problem.

But his words struck some part of me like a bolt of lightning.

…That’s right, her not coming back, wouldn’t it be a betrayal of the conclusion I drew, those words I uttered about Yoishi in those last moments of conflict? If she didn’t come back, wouldn’t that mean she ran away?

And at that moment, I finally saw what it was that I should do. Why did she go through all the trouble of descending to the depths of my dream? I understood the real reason.

“Only those who know the darkness know the value of the light, right?”

“…What did you just say?” Krishna-san tilted her head, I replied, ‘No’, and shook my head.

After that, I lay down once more. I rested both my hands on my stomach, deliberately wearing a smile, and forcefully said.

“I’ll be back, and I’ll definitely bring her with me.”

○

The blue world was filled with white smoke. Sounds of crackling fires bursting here and there, the smoke rose up in the air. However, because it was a dream, it wasn’t hot at all.

It couldn’t be helped that my vision was bad, for the time being I tried my best to remember the layout of the mansion while moving towards the interior.

That closed room --- I ran as fast as possible to the daughter's room. Fallen down all around were smoldering pillars and fusuma doors. I kicked them away as I continued forward, before long I could see the white blouse in the back, Yoishi's slender figure was visible. What was she doing, playing around with that kokeshi, while everything continued to burn around her?

"Hey, Yoishi. Let's go back." I called out to her from behind, Yoishi continued to stroke the kokeshi and whispered:

"Why did you deliberately give birth in the fire?"

"What did you say?"

"Konohanasakuya-hime was distrusted by Ninigi, why did she do such a thing?"

"How should I know? It was such a long time ago".

For now, I put my hand on her arm and motioned for her to get up and she said. "Undoubtedly, she thought about disappearing for a moment."

I stopped my hand at her words.

"Being suspected by the person she loved, Konohanasakuya-hime lost her place in this world." Yoishi raised her face in the direction of the burning flames. Beyond the fallen sliding doors, was the courtyard of the mansion. And there, the daughter of this mansion was looking up at a plum tree, as if she couldn't see the burning flames. Her eyes squinted slightly; she gently stroked a small flower bud on the verge of blooming. And – next to her, the two cousins were there, looking up at the plum tree with a gentle expression I hadn't seen before.

"Why didn't I realize it before?"

I sat down next to Yoishi, and spoke my thoughts out loud.

"Is that…me?"

The two who were fighting over the daughter, the faces of both cousins --- they were just like identical twins, with the same eyes and

ears everywhere. You could say if it was a face I was tired of looking at -- my own face.

“One of them protects the daughter.” Yoishi spoke, “And, the other you who tries to kill her.”

That moment, I finally realized it, who it was the daughter’s face resembled. That’s right – it was the face of my mother. It was an illusion carved from my memory that beautified and rejuvenated her.

“That’s right – the family that lives in this mansion is based on the emotions inside you."

“Then…” I pointed. “Who is the man looking at the daughter and the cousins from far away?”

“I think he represents your family which can’t support either one of you.”

Finally the scattered pieces began to come together.

The daughter pours her love into all these people. One cousin is the part of me that wants to live on, even after gaining my mother’s lung. The other cousin is the part of me that won’t accept that. To the bitter end, they quarrel over the daught—no, my mother. However, the head of the household, who can support neither side, and only stand there from a distance bewildered – That was -- an exact microcosm of my home from back then.

But now, all four of them were smiling together, looking up at the plum tree. It was a sight I should have seen some day. But, it was an illusion where the family members were smiling without being distorted.

“This place is comfortable to live in.” Yoishi spoke as she stared at that sight.

I stood up in silence and I put my hand on Yoishi’s shoulder.

“Let’s go back, Yoishi.”

I gazed at the mansion, whose outline grew more and more ominous.

“This is my dream. I created this world to avert my eyes from the pain of reality.”

But Yoishi didn’t move an inch. With her white hands, she gripped the kokeshi doll tightly, and whispered in a hoarse voice.

“You…Perhaps you should have lived the rest of your life here without ever opening it.”

My breath stopped at those words.

“There are things in this world that you shouldn’t willfully see.”

And with those words, the scattered parts inside finally took shape. This girl --- she and I really are the same. Yoishi, like me, is carrying something warped inside her as well, and had probably been suffering for many years because of it. That’s why, she could understand my pain and suffering; when I felt the pain of the boy from the notebook, could she have felt my pain?

I remember Yoishi’s forlorn figure.

I remember her thin back that seemed to carry all the sorrows of the world alone. I distorted my memories, and was able to live in comfort. But, she neither ran, nor sealed them away, and continued to carry it all on her back. That – must have been unbelievably heavy, she must have been unable to walk normally. And -- in the middle of that lonely journey, with her feet stuck into the ground –

Her heart may have died.

That is why: even while she still lived, it was as if she stood in the world beyond.

“Yoishi – you…”

Those words spontaneously spun from my mouth.

“What the hell – killed you?”

If it wasn’t for this strange place, I probably wouldn’t have asked that. And I probably couldn’t ask her again. However, at that

moment, the words came out of my mouth spontaneously.

That idiotic question of mine --- twisted Yoishi's lips into a tearful shape for just one moment.

As she was about to speak through the gap in her lips – in the dark recesses of her eyes, I saw something.

The instant that silhouette emerged, every part of me was filled with fear.

On the other side of the dark colored eyes, a black figure wriggled.

That ominous something -- twisted and turned as it gradually molded itself into shape.

It was – a black haired girl.

Her dark colored hair fluttered, with her white face and beautiful features, she--

Somehow looked similar to Yoishi but -- the aura was definitely different. With a faint smile, that face seemed to be filled with the malice of this world, it was horrifying.

-- You kill people because it's fun. People can't stand suffering faces. If you press them a little, people break so easily. It's so fun to break happy people. Is it fine if I press you just a little? I'm going to press you to make this world so much fun--

Those red lips opened, and began to spit out many twisted words.

"—Absolute evil."

In the pale blue world, my faint words echoed in silence.

"That's why, whenever I feel malice, I vomit."

Yoishi's slender legs shook, as she spoke weakly.

"When my heart dies, it's in an instant – Without any warning, when I've realized it, it's already dead."

The Yoishi from before: The Yoishi who happily leapt into whatever monstrosity that lay before her, that girl wasn't present here now. In front of me was just a girl acting appropriate for her age -- broken in spirit. Yoishi's well-shaped eyebrows were warped, her large eyes filled with clear tears that were on the verge of falling.

"I don't know what it feels like to be scared anymore."

「 "Are you scared?" "Do you feel fear now?" "How does it feel to be scared?" 」

I recalled those past words of hers—

Before I knew it, I was hugging Yoishi's slender body tightly. I embraced that slender shoulder and arms, as if to confine her inside me.

"It's alright now – I'm sorry."

This girl was -- a warm corpse. When she would spit out words, they would be accompanied with the scent of death. That kind of Yoishi, had seen something she wasn't supposed to see. She found out something that she shouldn't have, and as a result, was swallowed by the deep darkness. And thus, she lost the emotion known as fear.

--Once a person knows the depth of the darkness, they will end up possessed by those depths.

She said that once in the past. That was in fact, about herself. She was going after the paranormal in search of her lost feelings of fear. Just as I was drawn to my mother out in the darkness — even if I were to burn myself sooner or later, she too would jump into the flames of darkness.

"There is no malice present here." Yoishi murmured, transparent tears overflowed from both her eyes.

"Even if you say we should go back – no matter how much I look for it, I can't find a reason to return."

It's harsh to think that she doesn't want to return to this world – I recalled that kinagashi wearing bastard's words. Countless emotions

were overflowing inside me, sweeping away and tossing about. I was powerless, an incompetent bastard who couldn't even save a single crying girl in front of me. What should I do? What should I say to her? A person like me, is there anything I could say to Yoishi? Was there anything I could do? Without a shred of logic, could my crappy words move her heart in the least?

--That's right, I reached my hands out in desperation, and there...

"I'm still alive." I whispered those words which were just on the tips of my outstretched hand. "And you too, are still alive." I said something completely nonsensical while looking straight into Yoishi's eyes.

"For you, living itself might not be what you want; I don't know how heavy the burden it is that you're carrying, and, I can't even say that I really understand. Neither can I carry the tremendous something that you are burdened with."

But, together with those lines which I did my best to squeeze out, I felt a thin, thin, faint light shine in from the far away heavens. And that tightened something in my stomach at a tremendous speed. I could feel it, the power being transmitted to both my legs.

"But from now on, I'll stand by your side. I'll always stand by your side, and share half of your burden. From here on I'll stand in the way of any malice that's pointed your way. Anything that would want to kill you would have to go through me first. To sum it all up, as long as I'm alive, I will never let you be killed."

"……."

Yoishi looked at me astonished, I'd really done it now, I thought. But, I would have to take responsibility for my illogical words now. Now, I'd have to be armed with the theory of the lifetime. I don't know if these words would become true or not, something ridiculously heavy is now entrusted to me. I frantically turned over my little storehouse of knowledge, scampered to the bottom, and, in the nick of time -- caught sight of that legend. And then I worked out an interpretation.

"Listen, remember that story you said a while ago, about Princess

Konohanasakuya-hime?”

“…….Eh?”

“You said she wanted to disappear, but according to legends, she didn’t disappear. She purposely gave birth to a child in the fire. If she were to die, she wouldn’t be able to give birth. Why is that? Maybe you don’t know why, but I do. Konohanasakuya-hime's thoughts in the fire were like this: Within me there dwells a new life that's eager to come out. There is a life that desperately wants to be born from me, me who decided to disappear from this world. That moment, didn’t she decide? To walk along side that life -- she realized that taking that path would be more painful than dying. That’s why Konohanasakuya-hime’s personification: the Fuji mountain and cherry blossom are beautiful. They touch the hearts of us Japanese.”

“…..That logic is a failure.”

“Aw jeez, just shut up, don’t object. I know it already. It’s what I think. Nobody knows the truth of what happened back then. That’s why, in short – “

I pushed myself to the limits, and brought it to an end with the worst and strongest nonsensical words.

“From now on going forward, you walk with your head held high.”

The moment I announced those words, I heard a terrible sound close by. I narrowly pulled Yoishi towards my side as the wall together with the beam behind her collapsed. As I held Yoishi’s head in my arms, I also had a sniff of her hair. She’s like that in my dream as well, isn’t that a little strange?

“What is strange?”

Yoishi inquired, but I just shook my head, as if to say no.

“When we get back, take a bath.”

Yoishi slightly tilted her head away and replied as usual, I don’t like baths, as she stood up.

And it was the moment a different burning beam fell down.

“Come on!”

I promptly pulled Yoishi’s hand, and we ran from there while holding hands. My left hand gripped Yoishi’s, with my right hand I protected myself the sparks of the collapsed pillars, and we ran out of the room. However, as soon as I came out into the corridor I realized, the collapsing mansion was enough to completely destroy my sense of direction. Clicking my tongue, I ran to the left side where the fire was weaker. The mansion wasn’t like a vast labyrinth. If I were to just run in a straight direction, we’d be able to get out of here. If we just follow the fence from there, we should arrive at the main gate. However, perhaps it was because the mystery of my heart had been solved and the mansion had served its purpose, the structure of the mansion became so chaotic that the directions of top, bottom, right and left were vague. The stairs were connected with the kitchen; in front of the toilet was the storage room. The tatami mats continued for eternity. The corridor was winded into a spiral shape.

“Damn it, which way?”

On top of that the sparks were falling rapidly from overhead, burning my skin. They weren’t hot, but they were inflicting a dull pain, and seemingly erasing my existence.

--Dammit, It’s impossible.

A voice inside me said that, and I shouted back.

“It’s not impossible. This is my dream.”

Like hell am I gonna end up killed in my own dream. Like hell am I gonna stand being killed by anyone.

I yelled that as I clasped Yoishi’s hand as tightly as I could and kept running. The white darkness spreads before me. I was quickly covered in smoke and couldn’t even see my fingers.

-- The probability of you ever waking up again will be slim to none.

I faintly remembered the words of that kinagashi wearing bastard,

but I shook my head and cleared away any such thoughts. I'll definitely get back. Back to that apartment, back to Tokyo. And back to Fujieda, this time for sure, I'll take back reality. I'll rebuild my distorted and trampled memories. I'll take back the everyday life the way it was supposed to be. But – I still couldn't see the exit anywhere. Wherever I looked, the rubble from the mansion blocked our path. The pillars of fire rose relentlessly.

It might really be useless, after all.

It was that moment when I raised my head in weakness.

From the white darkness, someone's hand held out towards me. It was a small hand. Because of the smoke, I couldn't see whose face it was. But for some reason, I eagerly gripped that hand without any hesitation. Under the guidance of that hand, I ran out of that flaming corridor with Yoishi. The walls were crumbling, beams were falling down. Even if it was regrettable, this mansion was close to its demise. Yet despite that, I didn't know how much further we would have to go. However, however... strangely enough, the hope in my heart which had begun to disappear just before was still there. Without hesitation, it guided us -- this small hand. I didn't know why, but it was trustworthy. Even though I had suffered through many creepy experiences up until now, yet I still concluded that. Why was that? Running with all their might, I caught glimpse of the feet of the child right in front of me. And because of that, I realized it. At this child's feet, was a white sneaker tied with blue shoelaces.

The moment I realized who that child was, my vision suddenly blurred.

"Over there."

The place ahead Yoishi pointed at, was the collapsed gate burning down.

--It was the exit.

I felt I'd be able to manage somehow or another when I reached there.

But the moment I thought that, the tiny hand grasping my left hand disappeared. Becoming flustered I looked back, her was there, enshrouded in smoke. Gently waving his hand in my direction and faintly smiled. I waved my hand in response with as much power as I could muster, at the same time, the mansion collapsed with the sound of an iceberg breaking.

We ran.

The main gate was already open.

The thick latch was lying on the ground, broken.

I let Yoishi pass through there, and looked back – that moment…

--At the entrance of the crumbled mansion, I realized someone was gazing my way. Dimmed with the white fog, my feelings burst forth seeing the beloved figure.

“Mother.”

The world was crumbling – shrinking rapidly. At the end of this white world -- I cried at the top of my voice.

“Thank you.”

“And I’m sorry.”

“I was running away. I was protected and behaved like a spoiled brat.”

Even as my voice grew dim, I continued to yell.

“But, I think I’ll carry everything by myself now.”

“The things father and sis were carrying for me.”

“I'm gonna live my reality.”

That’s why.

That’s why--

No matter what I did, my tears continued to fall, and I couldn't utter those words.

I felt the soft power of Yoishi's fingertips being poured into my left hand.

With a flood of emotions, I cried my heart out:

"Goodbye, mother."

The first thing I perceived was the warm sunlight from the window. I was in my apartment. I was in my futon – And, I recognized the smiles of Krishna-san and the others; being hugged by the petite site manager, Karasu-san and the others all at once, I knew I had returned alive. By the way, this didn't include that kinagashi wearing bastard, of course. I was dumbfounded as the Buddhist priest hugged me with a scary smile, anyway, Krishna-san's master which was supposed to be that smug bastard, after he performed hypnosis on me, seemed to have left at once. Well, I suppose that's for the best.

Anyhow, I tore off from the lot, quickly rose up, and examined the face of the sleeping Yoishi next to me. Yoishi was still sleeping then. With her fingers crossed on her stomach, she was lying down, as if she wasn't breathing.

Was she able to come back?

The abyss of the world beyond and this world. – The absolute boundary, from the 'abyss of the underworld'.

The moment I thought that, Yoishi, slightly opened her eyes. And – let out a sigh, speaking in a somewhat embarrassed tone.

"It was comfortable there."

Epilogue

I understand, it's true that in this world you have to be cautious like you're cautious when exploring haunted places. In the shadow of fun things, lurk painful and difficult things, they are all present on the path we choose – This time, I learned that painfully. There may be a clear spring at the end of a narrow road. There may be a beast waiting at the end of a big, bright road. It's up to you to choose where to go on that crossroad, since nobody knows what lies ahead. Even if you keep your ears and eyes open, and try your best to think, you may make mistakes. But, it's wrong to blame yourself or the people around you when that happens. Rather it would be better to enjoy it. I'm sure that way life will be—

"….It would be brighter that way."

Leaning back on a bench in Tokyo station, I was thinking those kinds of things absentmindedly. My exams ended safely, I'd be going back home with my sister. I'd return to Fujieda, press the reset button on my life. It seemed the main gist of the events had been discussed by my sister and father. My father just took a long sigh as if a heavy weight had been lifted off of his shoulders and only said, 'is that so?' At any rate, I hadn't even visited my mom's grave until now, and that was a bad sign of filial piety. That's why… I'd planned on talking about the many things that happened up until now.

"Hey, Nagi-suke!"

Suddenly, there was a shout so angry that people in a hundred meter range turned around in unison.

"You bastard, sitting on that bench all self-important, don't act so carefree –dammit!"

I timidly turned to face that direction -- Bento, magazines, tea, souvenirs, and other stuff I didn't know, was being carried in large

quantities by my sister, twenty year old Akira Yamada. She tossed back her long, dyed in deep red, fluffy hair, and gave me a vicious stare.

“Making a lady carry heavy things like this, while you recline back on that bench, what are you thinking, ya bastard?”

“I-I’m sorry.” It's almost a conditional reflex now. I stumbled forward, and rushed towards my sister’s side.

“Listen! I even ended up paying for your substitute train ticket. I'll add that to the moving expenses from the other day, so you pay me back in full, alright?”

“….Yes.”

I hoped she would at least be a little nice to me after all that had happened, but that was actually a naïve view. In any case, there was still one week left to return home, so it was fine, she said. And without considering the fact that it had only being her second year in her company, she excitedly applied for a paid vacation, and decided to stay in my apartment until the day we returned. She took care of the food and laundry, but she took over the loft area where I slept, my right to choose the TV programs disappeared, and took away my right to the freshly drawn bath. I was only able to finish this trial because I was working in the family restaurants that open late at night.

As expected of the leader of the ladies: Akira of the Dawn, who was famous in Fujieda in the past.

“Come on, guys, grab all these. You owe me money for lunch and tea, right? Get a part time job and pay me back, ok? There's no interest for up to 3 months, but after that, I'll start charging 10% interest a month.”

….A demon. She’s a demon.

Does she realize that I'm a struggling university student with no allowance?

After shoving a total of six bags on me, my sister asked:

“So, you still haven’t realized it?”

“….What?”

I asked in return, and she clicked her tongue a little and ruffled her curly, bright hair.

“That's why you’re called a fool. Mind your surroundings a bit more.”

I look around and I see someone plodding around on a bench near the stairs, playing with their feet. In that familiar uniform of white blouse and black tie, was Yoishi Mitsurugi.

“I-it’s her, why is sh—“

“Hurry up and go, just remember, you have about two minutes until the train leaves. Keep it short.”

For all those thoughtful lines, she still thrust the luggage on to me while she went ahead and boarded the train. It couldn’t be helped; I staggered my way to the bench Yoishi was sitting on while carrying the luggage.

“Hey.”

I called out to Yoishi, she raised her face slightly.

“What are you doing in a place like this?”

Yoishi didn’t reply, and continued to look vacantly in the direction of her feet.

“Oh, I see, You came to see me off? Maybe you were worried we might not meet again.”

I took a seat next to the silent Yoishi – I intentionally put on a smile and said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll definitely be back. I’ll definitely return to my house, and open the fusuma, without fail. No matter what’s on the other side – I’ll accept it, and come back.”

I felt a pang in my chest at the end, but I spoke that much in one breath to hide it.

“But, you know, really-- it's all just like a dream.” I whispered that and Yoishi turned my way.

“Ah, I’m talking about it being a dream in a figurative sense, there’s still so many things that I can’t piece together. When I get back home, my mother won’t be there, I still…haven’t accepted that completely.”

I was supposed to say things as smoothly as possible - but how pathetic. I ended up saying something unexpected to Yoishi.

“If it’s about your mother, she’s here.”

“….Eh?”

Yoishi slowly took out something wrapped in white cloth from her bag. She gently unwrapped that with both her hands and it was – an old kokeshi doll. At that moment, an unspeakable chill spread down my spine.

“---Ah, You, That is…”

“It’s a trophy.”

Yoishi Mitsurugi’s tucked the kokeshi back into her bag again, her dark eyes shined with happiness.

“Show it to me once again, there’s no way that...”

“I refuse. This is something I brought out, after all.”

No, there’s no way it could have been that. She’s probably just trying to scare me with a similar kokeshi doll she found at a thrift store or something. That has to be it – I try to think like that, but it’s Yoishi after all. I couldn't think about the possibility of such a creepy thing happening calmly, so I stopped myself from pursuing it. After all, I was in a period of mental rehabilitation. I couldn’t afford to be shaken mentally right now.

“So, did you come all the way to Tokyo station just to show that me?”

Yoishi sank back into silence in response. I was at a loss for words, too, because I didn’t know how much I could ask in such a short amount of time. We just wasted the rest of our time there, as if we were playing the role of a new couple who were going to say farewell soon.

Before long – the announcement of the train departing echoed on the platform.

“Well… I’m going.”

I stood up, and Yoishi followed in silence. . As I walked to the entrance of the train and was about to push the bulky bundle of paper bags into the doorway, I heard a voice from behind me.

“Koumei school, first year highschooler, Class A, Yoishi Mitsurugi, 16 years old.”

Surprised, I turned back, Yoishi was standing still in a posture with her hands clasped behind her back.

The train bell rang – I panicked, and got on the train.

“Next time, if we meet again...”

Yoishi spoke. But that moment, the door closed, but she continued to speak. I tried hard to read the movement of her lips. I never studied lip-reading in the first place. But, miraculously her words reached me.

I’ll become your friend.

Yoishi said with a somewhat nervous expression.

“You're kidding me.”

I laughed.

I frantically waved to her as I looked out of the window of the

moving train.

I don’t know if that was enough to convey it to her.

In that case, I'll come back as soon as possible. She was wearing a forlorn look on her face as she came to see me off. So I'm going to convey this to her:

We’re not friends, we’re war comrades.

Afterword

There is a famous saying, ‘Knowing you know nothing’, but:

“After studying this much, I'm sure I've already figured out about 80% of the mysteries that make up the world, right?”, Is what an ordinary person would begin to think.

“As I learn, I wonder if we’ve even arrived at the entrance to the mysteries of the world.” Is what a wise person would think.

That was my interpretation so far. But in fact, I recently realized that there is no difference in the quality of being an ordinary person or a wise person; there is just a difference in the imagination of the "world" itself. Depending on whether you see the world as "the world itself" or "a part of the world," your perception of it changes drastically, and I, as an ordinary person, have finally come to think that the latter is somehow more exciting to live in. I wonder if that's why it’s important to broaden our horizons.

I still don't know which one is right: Do ghosts exist or not? Do aliens exist or not? But I think they are still "faint" beings that are behind a wall of knowledge, they are white and hazy so that’s why I think they stand out. Since ancient times, they have been a constant source of fear and at other times, a source of fascination for many people. I published this book here today with a keen awareness of the difficulty of capturing that "faintness".

Mr. Yoshitoshi Abe, who grasped my poorly written expressions with a keen sensitivity and expressed them visually in a wonderful way. The person in charge Mr. Katsushi Ota, whose hot words managed to get me through to the last line. I thank you so much. And to the person who holds this book in their hands: To the "writer", the "reader" is still a "faint" existence, who may or not exist. It’s always scary facing people through my work – but despite this, while reflecting on the wonderfulness of being able to have a chance

meeting like this, I'd like to express my deepest thanks to you.

June 2012

Ninomae Hajime

Afterword To The Afterword

One evening, after I had sent the first chapter, ‘The Wish-fulfilling House’ to the person in charge of my story, Katsushi Ota-san, he soon called me back and asked, “That was really interesting, but what’s going to happen in the story from here?” Being bad at writing plots, I timidly replied, “I don’t know. I just feel like the main character ◯◯’s ◯◯.” “Wow—I would love to read that! Then please continue!” I still remember how easily I was given permission to publish the book.

Normally, for a writer in my position to publish an issue, I would have to submit things like ‘Plot design’, ‘Character setting’, and ‘plot details’, but it was my first time being easily approved with my vague explanation. Since then, and until the series was completed – I was actually thankful to the point of tears for never having been given the task of submitting a plot, and my days consisted of writing frantically, determined to never betray this trust.

Now when I think of it, this series called ‘Phenomeno’ was a beautiful dream that ended before I had a chance to think of how to thank everyone, Abe Yoshitoshi-san, who was chosen to do the illustrations, the visual novel(with key animation by Yūichi Tanaka-san) that had been created to promote the series, and an audio reading event by Chiaki Kuriyama-san.

And today, when the paperback edition is published and Yukito Ayatsuji-san appeared on the obi[32], I was convinced that this was indeed a dream. No, even in my dreams, these kinds of extreme developments are not allowed. Truly, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to you all once again.

In addition, Mr. Moegi Hirabayashi who was assigned to "Phenomeno" series as deputy in charge. I have been thinking that I should thank him for his continuous support behind the scenes; He

himself is an excellent editor, and I am a little relieved to be able to write about it in this "Afterword to the Afterword". I am much obliged for all your support. Thank you very much for your kindness.

Finally, to those of you who are picking up this series for the first time here.

Nice to meet you, I'm Ninomae Hajime 一肇.

"I can't read this pen name!" Mr. Ota butted in when we first met, "It's read as Hajime Ninomae". "Please carry that illegible pen name as a cross for the rest of your life!" I was told that as well, but I will do my best to carry it for the rest of my life.

Together with the main characters of this work, 'Nagito' and 'Yoishi', I would like to thank you very much.

31st September

Ninomae Hajime

Translator's notes and references

1. ↑ Literally "Abyss of the Spirit World."
2. ↑ Taira no Masakado — Japanese commander and politician of the first half of the 10th century, one of the organizers of the uprising of 935-941. The myth holds that when Masakado's decapitated head was on display near a river bank in Kyoto, it opened its eyes and kept grinding its teeth, not showing any signs of decomposition. When plague broke out in Tokyo nearly 400 years later, it was also attributed to the vengeful spirit of Masakado. According to legend, the head is buried in a small shrine in the Otemachi, Tokyo and disrespect for the grave is punishable by a curse. https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/taira-no-masakados-grave
3. ↑ Oiwa-Inari Tamiya shrine is located at the Shinjuku district in Tokyo. This place was once home of Oiwa and Tamiya Iemon, protagonists of Yotsuya Kaidan, the famous Japanese ghost story of betrayal, murder, and revenge. Read more/
4. ↑ A specter said to have appeared in ancient times, named after his two faces on the front and back of his head (Ryoumen in Japanese meaning both sides), you can read more in-depth about him here: https://japanese-wiki-corpus.github.io/literature/Ryomen-sukuna.html
5. ↑ Japanese slang which means psychic receiver of signals. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Denpa
6. ↑ Original Japanese phrase used here is: Once it's past the throat, one forgets the heat (of the swallowed object)
7. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zashiki-warashi Usually pictured as a small girl in a kimono with a straight-edged bowl-cut and straight bangs.
8. ↑ "The Eight-span Mirror, part of The Three Sacred Treasures https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yata_no_Kagami.
9. ↑ 2channel (4chan was created as an English version of 2ch)

slang that has become widely used Internet slang. Derogatory in nature, can refer to dumbass and derivatives but also has other meanings like being socially inferior, or sometimes "Normie" or "NPC" but worse.

10. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dry%C5%AB-ji
11. ↑ From wikipedia: lit. 'enclosing rope' are lengths of laid rice straw or hemp rope used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimenawa
12. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kotodama
13. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hachi%C5%8Dji_Castle
14. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meoto_Iwa
15. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C5%8Dmon_period
16. ↑ A rope used for ritual purification in the Shinto religion. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimenawa
17. ↑ Ginkgo biloba, commonly known as ginkgo or gingko (/ˈgɪŋkoʊ, ˈgɪŋkgoʊ/ GINK-oh, -goh) also known as the maidenhair tree, is a species of tree native to China. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ginkgo_biloba
18. ↑ Kamishimo (old ceremonial dress) is a kind of formal kimono (traditional Japanese clothes) for men. https://www.japanese-wiki-corpus.org/culture/Kamishimo.html
19. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Osore
20. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ikiry%C5%8D
21. ↑ Cherry tree blossom princess
22. ↑ a slang term used in 2channel for someone who is extremely foolish
23. ↑ sliding door
24. ↑ A pun because Marui means round
25. ↑ unidentified mysterious animal
26. ↑ sliding door
27. ↑ Happi is a traditional tube-sleeved Japanese coat, usually worn during festivals. The usual happi color is blue, and the symbols of the festival or the participating association are depicted on the lapels and back in red, black or white.
28. ↑ Hanten is a short winter coat with a black satin collar and an item of traditional Japanese clothing. Hanten is very similar to a happi with a warm cotton padding that allows it to be used in winter or at night during a festival. Hanten also often features a family crest or other designs.
29. ↑ Tabi are traditional Japanese socks with a divided toe, worn

with thonged footwear. Jika-tabi are made of harder and stronger materials and often have a rubberized sole; they look like boots of different heights and more like street shoes than socks. Like regular tabi, jika-tabi have a separate thumb so they can be worn with loose strap shoes.

30. ↑ proverb meaning love is blind
31. ↑ wearing kimono casually
32. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Obi_(publishing)